

~~THE DEVIL~~
CAME ON.
~~SUNDAY.~~

THE DEVIL CAME ON SUNDAY

Back to Kilmuirie came Elsie, so branded as a Jezebel that women would cross the street rather than meet her face to face. Back too, full of efficiency and new ideas, came Jock, the son of the boss of the only factory in that small, bleak, grey stone Scottish town—the one industry there round which life revolved. But a third person slipped unnoticed into Kilmuirie that day: and that was the Devil, who had given to Jock his most priceless gift—the kiss of death.

Of course Will, Jock's dour, ageing, honest father, must accept a speculative entry into a new line of business, even if a bit of blackmail was needed to help him make up his mind. Of course the only open land left in the town could be better used for an extension of the factory than for playing fields: the children could play in the streets—they always had. Of course the chairman of the local committee, living on his Army pension, had to agree; but he needed money, and there was nothing wrong with an occasional, discreet Stock Exchange tip. Of course men were made redundant under the new regime, but there was no need for the foreman to take his and his family's lives just because he had lost his job. And, of course, it was sheer bad luck that Elsie on the sofa downstairs was so immersed in Jock's lustful demands that she could not hear her bed-ridden father's last cries for help. Jock found it bewildering, because he meant so well—but he did not realize the gift beyond price which the Devil had given him that Sunday.

Oswald Wynd has written a serious and major novel: a hard-hitting story of Scottish life which is aware of the evils to which mankind is heir, yet is filled with a compassion and understanding for those on whom life has been hard, and who may along the road have fallen below the standards to which they themselves, in their honest and simple way, would like to have kept.

By the same author

**BLACK FOUNTAINS
WHEN APE IS KING
THE STUBBORN FLOWER
MOON OF THE TIGER
SUMMER CAN'T LAST**

THE DEVIL
CAME ON SUNDAY

OSWALD WYND

CASSELL · LONDON

CASSELL & COMPANY LTD
35 Red Lion Square · London WC1

and at

MELBOURNE · SYDNEY · TORONTO · CAPE TOWN
JOHANNESBURG · AUCKLAND

First published 1911

PRINTED IN GREAT BRITAIN

by C. Tinling & Co., Ltd., Liverpool, London and Prescot
F. 261

TO DESMOND FLOWER

The lines from 'If' by Rudyard Kipling are used
by permission of Mrs. George Bambridge and
Macmillan & Co., Ltd.

I

THE girl sat alone in a local train moving up from the broad, central Scottish plain towards the hills. Night shut away the countryside, the windows reflecting back the compartment, but a dimmed version, pierced by occasional lights travelling through it. The girl had her hands folded in her lap, like a gesture of composure, though her body was upright against the hard cushions. Her eyes were fixed on a pale, negative British Railways water-colour of Norwich as a holiday resort. Beside her was a large plastic handbag and two crumpled papers full of the stale news of a day now spent. On the rack was one large leather suitcase with a label from a holiday camp on the Riviera.

The compartment was hers, but she looked rather as though she was using just that portion of it to which she was entitled by her ticket, with her handbag tucked in against her skirt, only the papers not part of the tidiness. Over each seat the plastic-shaded individual lights gave less than a minimum glow for reading. There was a smell of stale cigarette smoke and sooty moquette.

The girl stirred and gave a little cough, as though to identify herself in emptiness. She bent her head and looked at her hands in wash-leather gloves. She was a pretty girl, dark, with almost black hair, but dressed carefully to minimize this, in a neutral oatmeal coat, low-heeled shoes and a hat that looked like an old sales bargain worn for the first time. Her face was Scots, with that hint of squared jaw, a small firm nose, and large dark-lashed brown eyes. Only her skin suggested a life away from Scotland, a city skin, pale, needing the make-up she hadn't used. Her lips were full, the lower one almost heavy, but her lipstick was as discreet as a spinster's nail varnish, neutral pink.

The carriage rumbled and shook. There was a diesel on this line now, but not at night; at night it was the old train grumbling north from the junction, the wheezing engine towing a chain of decrepit memorials to another era of travel. Kilrudderie was the last stop, where the railway ended on a sudden barrier of mountains it had never attempted to penetrate. In these days the little town rather

ignored its railway, the station something apart in a valleyed pool of darkness, with beyond the glowing lights rising in terraces against the black hump of a hill.

The girl heard a hissing of steam and the whine of wheels on the last sharp bend before the station. It was an announcement to provoke the traveller's small panic of arrival, that looking about for something forgotten, the final opening and shutting of a handbag. Her fingers trembled a little as she did this, and she stood seeming to have to force her body up, as though journey's end brought her against a fear that had been neutralized in stillness. She tugged at the suitcase and it came heavily, its weight solid. When it was on the seat she stood with her fingers touching the handle, not noticing the first of the greenish-yellow platform lights.

'Kil-rud-derie.'

The porter's wail was dismal, a lamentation without hope, drowned by the noisy breathing out of the engine at the end of a day's effort.

The girl had trouble with the door; there was no handle on the inside, and the window was stiff. By the time she had got it down and was out on to the platform, the handful of other passengers were all near the steps to the bridge over the tracks, all hurrying to get clear of a railway they might have been ashamed of using.

The porter had no custom and he wandered down towards the girl, slowing, anticipating her independence. When she made no sign to him at all he stopped, his face a luminous green under gaslight. Then the girl came into that light, too, and he stared.

He turned slowly, watching her go up the steps, the bag banging against her legs. His mouth opened as part of the concentration of that stare. And then, a shambling little man, jerked into action by excitement, he turned and almost ran down the train towards the engine.

The driver was leaning out of the cab, the steam frothing up about him, a gaunt face touched with black, but settled now into a massive passivity of boredom. He looked as though he would never get out of his cab, never organize himself to the effort of doing that.

'Ed? What do you think? You'll no guess!'

The driver's expression remained lost and negative.

'Eh?' he said.

'You'll no guess who got off your train.'

'Who?'

'Elsie Garr. It was her I tell you. I was as near as I am to you. It was her.'

'Go on,' said the driver.

'I swear to Gawd! I seen her. As near as I am to you.'

'What would she be doin' here?'

'She's come home, that's what she's doing.'

'Ach, she wouldnae dare.'

'Ed, I swear to Gawd, I seen her. She walked right past me. Elsie Garr it was. Don't I know her? Wasn't she at the school with my Jessie?'

'Whaddya know?' Ed said. 'Elsie Garr. Is that a fact? Well now. Aye, well, I'll be getting home to my tea.'

Ed moved then, dropping down from the cab suddenly, that movement a surprise. He seemed to be deserting the engine, leaving it there to steam itself cold.

'Aye, aye,' he said standing on the platform. He appeared to have forgotten the small sensation, or put it away, rubbing his blackened hands over his face in a gesture of weariness, as though the fourteen-mile run from the junction had taken it out of him.

The porter was gone, plunging down from the platform and somehow working his way under the couplings behind the engine. He surfaced on an empty track and scrambled up on to the open area in front of the still-lit station offices. He lunged to a door and pushed it open.

The station master, in his official cap, was inside, working at a vast ledger on a sloping desk, making careful and deliberate entries. About him was an aura of podgy dignity, carefully maintained.

'Shut that damn' door,' he said.

The porter shut it, breathless, wheezing suddenly.

'You wouldn't know what I seen. Getting off the train. Right this minute. You must have took her ticket. It was Elsie Garr. Her on the telly.'

The station master didn't look up. He made another entry.

'That hoor,' was all he said.

Elsie Garr walked down the lane she had used all her childhood to get to school. She was weighed down by her bag and the sense of

stepping back again into something almost static, where there was no real change, only a kind of sluggish current of movement which waited to take her again into its own pace.

Her heart was thumping from the effort of carrying the bag, but there was fear in that quickened beat, too, the fear of coming back from a different pattern to one which had gone on steadily without her. She hadn't the comfort, either, of the stranger's curiosity, the interest of exploration. For her there was no strangeness at all, just the town waiting.

The lane was empty and she remembered how it had frightened her once, that sense of contained silence between high stone walls. Footfalls broke the silence, hollow and echoing, but when they were gone it moved back into possession. Ahead was a yellow glow from the High Street, and silhouetted against this were the strangely broken crow-stepped gables of the old Scots buildings.

There was no wind in that town of winds and the air, though colder than London, had no edge to it. Scotland was acknowledging the late spring, if grudgingly.

People in the High Street were crossing the lane end, but none of them turned into it. There were cars, too, though the noise of them didn't reach her. The first house of the pictures would be emptying, which would account for the people down there. In an hour or two the main street would be quiet enough, the lights out in the windows, only the fish and chip shop still a centre, with the sound of a juke-box booming from it.

Elsie had the High Street to cross to reach more gas-lit quietness. She wanted to run across that street, to escape it quickly, possessed by one of the panic terrors of childhood she had thought long-forgotten.

But she didn't run and no one looked at her. Under the glowing awning of the Odeon was a group of youths in jeans and girls in tight pants with their breasts pointing through thin, chain-store sweaters. One of the boys hit out at another, there was a scuffle at the pavement edge. The girls tittered. A shrill voice said:

'What a man, eh, what a man?'

The door of Tomelli's opened, with a blast of jive, and a shape lurched out, clutching a fat parcel wrapped in newspaper. The man turned and bellowed back into the café.

'I'll get the bloody beer.'

Elsie reached the gas lights and the quietness, changing the bag from one hand to the other. An ache ran from her arm down one side, and into a breast, making it feel heavy. The day's travelling had laid on her a tire like the one from love-making without love, a deep need for withdrawal from contact into some padded privacy where the groping hands of living couldn't touch her. But there was no privacy waiting, no hope of it. She knew.

She remembered the voice of the station porter, reaching her on the shadowed iron stair, high, thin and excited above the hiss of steam.

'Elsie Garr. It was her I tell you. It was her.'

A nine days' wonder. Only it wouldn't be that in Kilmallock. She'd already had that and grown almost used to it, even grown out of it to a kind of freedom. But what she had achieved wouldn't serve her here, the new ordeal would be drawn out and slow.

A squat, massive building pushed out into the street, narrowing it with a kind of aggressive insolence, and beyond this was her father's house, small and wedged in, one big room down and two up, the upper rooms sending out little dormers like the ears of a cocky mongrel dog. There was one light upstairs and one down, and none over the door.

There was still no bell, only the old knocker which set up a clanking din in the passage beyond, a gloomy warning.

A light glowed in the fanlight and the draught excluder at the foot of the door scraped back on a piece of grit. Morag McFie, looking no older, as though the packed flesh under her skin allowed no slackness for wrinkles, stood there.

'Well, it's you,' she said. 'Did you no have the taxi? I was waiting for the sound of the taxi.'

Elsie had to clear her throat.

'I didn't think of it. How is . . . my father?'

Morag moved back a little into the hall, making room.

'Och, well, just what you expect. Come in, then.'

It might have been Morag's, that kitchen with a black, open-barred range. She moved about it in possession and what changes there were came from her hands; the mantelshelf, cluttered always with a weird collection of the unlovely and unusable, was somehow less burdened. An empty tea caddy no longer sat at one end. The vast china dog was gone, too, broken perhaps. And in one corner was a television set, a

glossy, plywood box taking an aggressive pride of place, with even the walls behind it cleared of ornament.

Morag noticed Elsie's look.

'Did you no ken your Pa had one? It's two years old. A lovely set, too. We've all got them, ye ken. It's an awf fy boon to the old folk.'

There was no surface hostility in Morag at any rate. Her fat, red face was expressionless, but then it always had been. She moved about, competent in the duty of tea-making, her every footfall a thump on boards that were probably riddled with woodworm.

'Oughtn't I to go up to Father?'

'It'll no matter when you go up. He disna ken onyboby.'

'You mean . . . not since his attack?'

'That's right. Not since it hit him, like. My, there's an awf fy lot goin' doon like this wi' hearts. There was Bella McClintock last week. Went doon like a stone. Like yer tea strong?'

'Pretty strong, yes.'

'Well, sit in.'

It was a baker's tea, everything from Patterson's in the High Street, but plenty of it, baps and scones and flouries and a sponge cake. There was jam from an English maker and butter from Denmark.

'There's a bit of fish coming,' Morag said.

She served the fish and then sat in herself, eating rapidly and with the steady concentration befitting a house of sorrow. There was no talk at all and Elsie felt herself absorbed into the massive silence that was accented by the slow hissing of a half-empty kettle on the hob. The tension that was part of her tire eased a little. She wasn't hungry, but she ate. It seemed to her then that one of the comforts of Scotland is the food and the pot of tea augmenting all moments of emotional strain, a kind of permanent and ever waiting reinforcement. You ate more at funerals than at weddings and if there was real pain it was dulled by a stuffed stomach.

Morag rose, suppressing a belch.

'Finished? Well, sit over.'

Elsie went to her father's chair. It was Victorian mahogany with carved grapes and moulded brown leaves, covered in a green tapestry which held the embedded grease of generations. The chair received her without any welcome, holding her body upright. Morag sat in the other chair. They both stared at the kettle for a time.

'You'll not be doing anything on the telly, then?'

'No, not any more.'

'Aye. Yon was a bad business. There was a lot of talk about it here, ye ken?'

'Yes, there would be.'

'Folks is not quick at forgetting in a place like this.'

'I know what Kilrudderie's like.'

'Mind you, they'll get used to it. You being back, I mean. You'll be staying?'

'As long as Father's ill.'

Morag folded her hands.

'Aye. That could be time enough. Archie was a strong man, being a joiner. He could just lie there, ye ken. Month after month. You wouldn't wish it, but it could happen. You'll know he's blind?'

'Yes. You said so in your letter. I don't suppose it matters very much to him?'

'It means feeding him. It's messy, like.'

The comfort of the high tea was still there, it put a kind of screen between them and the realities of their talk. Morag stirred on her chair, shifting weight from one vast buttock to the other. She looked a little as though her underwear were binding her, a physical distress in her slightly popping eyes.

'I'd best away then,' she said, for an excuse to rise, her hand doing a bit of surreptitious tugging at her backside. 'You can manage the old man for the night, you think?'

'What has to be done?'

'Och, there's no much. He's fed and I've fixed him up just before you came. He'll not need a thing. And the nurse'll be in early tomorrow morning. She'll put you right. It's no that bad, and he's not that much trouble. I'll say that for him. I mean, just lying there, mumbling away. You'd think he was enjoying himself sometimes, so you would.'

Morag slammed the front door when she went, a kind of finale to her long term in power. The house shook. Elsie groped in her handbag for a cigarette and lit it with a spill from the jar of them still sitting on the mantelpiece. Her father had always made his own spills from twisted newspaper.

The fire needed coal and she found the scuttle, the first move in a new routine she hoped would take over and fill her days. It was warm

in the kitchen and cold in the hall and on the stairs leading to that room above this from which no sound came at all.

She should have gone to him at once, for all Morag had told her not to. That would be commented on, it was probably being talked about already, over more tea in another kitchen. She had been in the house an hour and eaten a good meal and never made a move up to the old man on the bed from which he would be carried when his time came.

Tongues would be curving around that, savouring it.

Elsie sat down, leaning forward, her hands over her face, as though she was shutting something out. The hardest thing had been coming over the doorstep into this house she hated. Everything else had led to that moment, with its own secret horror, a moment that was worse than the one still to come when she looked at him.

This was his house and she was flesh of his flesh and had always hated it. There was nothing more than that, and there never had been, no cruelty, just the horror in itself, that sense of a bond that made claims without love. There never had been love, never a movement of it towards the frightened child in the dark or the older child looking out into a world beyond this one. He had never damned her for going or wanted her to stay.

But he had bought a television. To watch her?

She thought of the letters she had forced from herself, and his answers once a year, in a spidery writing . . . 'I keep well and Morag still comes in to do for me.' The routine of that had seemed endless, a continuous drawing of the circle between the workshop and Morag's teas from Patterson's and the new intrusion of that box in the corner she hadn't known about. He had always read his papers after tea, two of them. Had they been given short shift recently while he stared at the screen?

Slowly she pushed herself up, the wooden grapes knobs under her fingers. The cigarette she threw in the fire that was hers to tend now.

A faint smell came down the stairs to meet her, sickly sweet. The lower light didn't reach the upper landing and she had to find a switch there, her fingers groping for its place on the wall, a small detail of the house gone from her mind when she had thought nothing would ever go.

The bulb up here was unshaded, glaring out on the aged, papered

walls where roses turned brown sat in dismal, separated clumps like a rash. There was a pattern of damp under the pitch of roof which she remembered, and the three treacle coloured doors, two to bedrooms, and one to a little packed hole where there was a water-closet and a wash-basin. Elsie remembered when the wash-basin had been put in, a symbol of modernity, of keeping up with the times. Only cold water reached it, if you wanted hot you brought a kettle.

The door to her father's room wasn't quite shut and the light was hard through the crack. She remembered again that he was blind, and the light wouldn't matter. She began to tremble, a shivering that was like a warning of a chill, not easy to control. She had to stand in front of the door for a minute, waiting before she could put out her hand.

Archie Garr lay under a pink eiderdown from which a white tasselled coverlet had been folded back to cover the brass knobs and scrollwork of the bed end. He was neatly placed, a body tidily centred, his head in the exact middle of the pillow.

She wouldn't have recognized him at all, that sunken face, those eyes fixed on the ceiling, that slack mouth open with a slight trembling of lips. His grey hair was wispy and lifeless, but stuck up in a little quiff, like the down of a young baby fluffed by a doting mother. In a glass on a small table were two sets of dentures, upper and lower, very shining, there waiting as though ready for the remote possibility of a return to a life which needed this convenience.

Elsie stood just inside the door, the trembling gone. This shape in the bed wasn't her father at all. She could move at once into a neutrality from which all feeling was stripped away, even compassion, and like that she went towards him. She put her hands on the bed and heard the creak of the straw mattress under her weight. The sickly sweet smell was strong.

'Do you want anything?' she said, and her voice was loud, oddly aggressive in her own ears.

The sound reached him, if nothing else. Archie Garr's head gave a surprising, almost lively jerk on the pillow, while his dark, unfaded eyes moved around her without focusing. He answered her words with a sound that might have been a baby's, almost a chortle, and coming from no effort of intelligence.

The terror came to her again, from seeing an ending prolonged, a body stripped of any dignity, the life kept in it as though in a kind of

punishment. Dignity he had always had from his compact, egotistical coherence as a man, from his inflexibly retracted horizons which were pulled in about himself. He had been a joiner, and an Elder and a Bailie of the town. Now he was this.

His mouth changed in shape, almost as though muscles were controlling it again. His lips opened and closed while his eyes moved round and about the room. Then she saw what could only have been a smile, suddenly fixed, but like no smile she had ever seen from him. It was as though pleasure had caught him in that moment, a sudden extreme of sensual delight. His body moved under the quilt.

On the stairs, groping down them, her hands out to the rail and to the wall, Elsie said out loud.

'I've got to unpack. I've got to! I've got to stay!'

She lay in the bed she had used from childhood, but alien to it, not able to work out any compromise with the lumps in the mattress. There had been a way once, a sheltering valley between points of hardness, but her body must have been smaller then.

Her father across the hall was remote again; she had come to a sanity on this, a kind of working arrangement with feeling. You went to that door and in the very act of opening it slipped into an overall of neutrality. Tomorrow she would learn what had to be done and do it. You didn't abuse your feelings with imagination. You were like a nurse growing older, with the approaches to death and the beginning of life a routine from which you turned naturally to the cup of tea that warmed your stomach and the agreeable privacy of an hour with your favourite television programme. That was the way it was done, it was a trick, a habit of mind, training.

Some, of course, a few, kept their love by them, a continuous act of compassion that was spiritual and a discipline of religion. Elsie didn't have that, it wasn't available, she wasn't even trying to work towards it from her own battering in living. The only love she had reached were hands on her body and lips on her mouth. The only love she had was Jock.

It was like a door with a catch that was weak, you thought you had closed it firmly enough, but it sprang open. He came in, with his casualness about observing any pattern of preliminaries, wanting her on a bed with as little delay as possible. He hadn't been much of a

respecter of time or place, either, coming when he could and when he wanted to, and finding her with that terrible weakness of readiness which she could never control by any will of her own.

She moaned then as she had often moaned under his naked flailing body.

2

HESTER FAIRWAY-CAMPBELL came down the long, almost black passage from the kitchen, carrying a large tray on which sat two egg cups on small saucers. She kicked open a baize door with one foot and stepped into a front hall bright with a hard spring sunshine that probed at shabbiness. There was nothing wrong with the Persians on the slightly gummy flooring or the Sheraton sidepiece with the gilt mirror over it; the setting for these was what needed attention, and had for years. Sometimes Hester walked through her huge, rambling house, from room to room, her mind doing an inventory of costs for decoration, eighty pounds here, sixty there, forty for the big bathroom, at least two hundred for the hall. The total was impossible. She simply had to turn from it, trying not to be bitter about the price Hamish had paid to install electric heating for his battery hens.

The dining-room door also got a kick. It was the only way to deal with doors when you had a tray. And this tray was mother-of-pearl inlay on Chinese lacquer, hideous, relegated to the kitchen, and heavy as lead.

'What the hell?' Hamish said, looking up from the *Scotsman*.

'Only the skivvy with breakfast, dear,' his wife said sweetly.

Hamish grunted.

'So you're in one of those moods.'

She put an egg in front of him and carried the other down to her own place at the far end of the table. Hamish insisted on living in state like this, meals in a cold dining-room, at the big table, a long polished surface between them with things neatly arranged on it.

'We're late this morning,' he said.

She smiled.

'I was having a talk with Mrs. Menzies. The news. You shouldn't object since we only take one paper. Some of the news is rather hot, Hamish.'

'Eh? Town gossip. You know I don't like it.'

'That's rather pompous of you, since we have to feed on it. It isn't as if there is anything else. But do go on with the *Scotsman*.'

'What's happened?'

'Elsie Garr is back.'

'Eh? You mean . . . ?'

'There is only one Elsie Garr, dear. You'd be more aware of that if we had a television set. Or we took one of the popular papers.'

'What the hell's she come to Kildrummy for?'

'It's her home. And her father is dying.'

Hamish had a rather peculiar way with an egg, a miniature campaign. He scorned slicing off the top but took a spoon and neatly pulverized an area about the size of a shilling. He then carefully removed all the broken shell and had a whole egg looking up at him intact, ready for the final assault. Hester watched this operation. She saw her husband lift his spoon, hold it suspended and then shoot a look at her.

'Well?'

'I was only thinking that it might turn out rather awkward, Hamish.'

'Why should it?'

'Elsie Garr was Jock Innis's mistress down in London.'

'Talk!'

'Oh, no. Fact. He was lucky to escape publicity at the trial. Perhaps that's why he went to America.'

'What the devil has this got to do with us?'

'It's so elementary I shouldn't have thought I'd have to explain. Our son marries Jock's sister in three months. And Jock flies in from America in a day or so. He's coming straight to Kildrummy.'

'Good Lord! You mean you think that girl's come here to . . . ?'

'I have an open mind, dear. But I like to be prepared. And the town will be sizzling.'

'You mean they know about Jock and Elsie Garr?'

'Hamish, because we live up on a hill with a nice acreage of trees around us is no reason to play this game of innocence about what's going 'n down there. They aren't your peasants any more, dear, if they ever were. And they certainly won't behave as you would like.'

'Meaning what?'

'Meaning there's nothing Kildrummy enjoys more than a good laugh. And they all know Colin is marrying for money, because we have no other way of providing for him.'

'I don't know why the hell you have to be so deucedly unpleasant at breakfast!'

'It's my way of facing the new day and all its little problems.'

'It's your way of getting at me, you mean!'

'Perhaps. Eat your egg, dear.'

Hamish's spoon came down, but the first attack was too violent, and yellow yolk spurted up, on to his waistcoat. He took a linen napkin to wipe it off.

About all that remained of the Hamish she had married was this dapperness. She remembered him in 1934, at the Black Watch cocktail party where they had first met, Hamish firm-buttocked in his kilt and all that could be required in hairy knees, prancing about like a stallion on a spring day, breathing out the strong aroma of good whisky. She had been wearing a print voile . . . that was a material which had disappeared . . . and a picture hat which the wind had lifted off her head. Hamish had done the retrieving. They had stood smiling at each other and the sexual attraction had been strong, oh, very strong indeed.

Other things came into it too. Then Hamish had this house and fifteen hundred a year and his commission. He now had this house and twelve hundred a year and his battery hens. Hester had been a colonel's lady for so long that the importance of this sensation had diminished to the point of extinction. Sometimes she felt very tired.

But on one matter she was determined. Colin had his commission, too, and the threat of this house one day. He needed more than a diminished income to go with it. You bought your position in the world now with hard cash, and that was why Hester had for a considerable time made a point of being nice to Sheina Innis. Will Innis, her father, was the sole proprietor and stockholder of Scotsroofs, Ltd., Kilmallock's main industry, with a reputed turnover of something in the region of a quarter of a million pounds a year. Sheina wouldn't get it all, with an heir available, but she would be provided for.

Hester liked old Will, almost as much as she disliked his wife. The two of them understood each other, and there was still a glint in his eye after the second whisky. He had a way of reaching out for your arm and holding it, which was by no means repulsive when you considered the financial solidity behind the hard old fingers.

'What the devil are you thinking about, Hester?'

She smiled at her husband.

His innocence was military and came from a training in a strict attention to the job in hand, however minor. Since his retirement Hamish had really only been happy with his hens and—allowing for the basic cruelty of this method of producing eggs and broilers—he had a kind of feeling for them that was almost emotional. There they sat as units in organized rows, doing what was expected of them even without orders from the O.C. It was discipline carried to its logical, brainless end, but this was not something she would ever suggest to her husband. At times her own heresies almost frightened her, for discipline was needed, there was too little of it about. Even the Women's Rural Institute resisted it these days.

'I was wondering what we could do,' Hester said.

'About Jock and this gal? Damn' little I should think, that is if he's used to having her and she's willing.'

He stopped. Hester looked at him in surprise. Her husband was out of his present character, a long way out of it, back beyond seniority, a subaltern almost. It gave her the uneasy feeling that perhaps everything wasn't completely under the control of long habit and that Hamish might have compartments of privacy as real to him still as those hens. She felt disturbed enough to take him seriously again.

'Hamish, do you like Jock?'

He filled his chest, patted the egg off his moustache and said loudly in his Senior-Officer-in-Mess voice:

'No. As a matter of fact I don't.'

'Why?'

'Not easy to say. You may laugh, a soldier gets an intuitive feeling about men. Even if it makes me sound like an old woman.'

'It doesn't.'

He looked at her then with a sudden flicker of gratitude in his eyes.

'What is it about Jock?'

'Lord, I'm not one of those trick cyclists. But I'll say this. If he was an officer in my battalion I'd bloody well get rid of him somehow.'

'You mean he wouldn't show up well as a soldier?'

'No, not that. But he's as cold as ice-pudding.'

'Oh,' said Hester quietly.

Somewhat that frightened her, as though her feeling accepted this as the truth at once, a kind of revealed truth that hadn't been arrived at from any conclusions of her own. Jock Innis didn't come near them really, and there was no reason why he ever should, but his family held the power in Kilmuirderie now, and beyond it, too. The town hung on that business of prefabricated houses. Old Will she felt she knew; he was dogged industry and perseverance to which was added a flair for seizing the right moment and gambling. But it was all transparent enough, almost endearing, the local tycoon who had hoisted himself up by sweat and a certain cunning. You couldn't see Jock sweating, yet you knew that he would never miss a chance and that he was the new generation taking over from the old.

'Jock will do well with Scotsroofs, I think,' she said.

'Damn' well, in his way.'

She had reached for her teapot, but she put it down again.

'Hamish, do tell me what you mean. I really want to know. I've got the feeling it might be important to us.'

The Colonel smiled.

'You flatter me. Odd role for you. Don't expect it from the Scots wife, do we?' He laughed. 'All right, I'll tell you what I think. Never see the man without feeling it. Put Jock down across from a lot of Russians and he wouldn't lose a trick. He could play their kind of chess. They way they tick wouldn't worry him at all, because he goes along the same road. Doesn't give a tuppenny damn about soggy human values and all that sort of thing. He's grown up without a pinch of it in his make-up. There are people like Jock in this country today who make the go-getting Americans seem like babes. And I'll bet my boots that he'll come back from the States having outsmarted them in some way. It scares me, Hester. It makes me feel an old fogey, the way I began to feel in Berlin after the war. Every time we had anything to do with the Ruskies, which you know was plenty. We weren't sitting opposite what I call a human being at all, just a calculating machine. That's Jock, too.'

'Haven't we always produced the calculating machine in Scotland?'

'I don't know. Maybe. But they haven't seemed to sit over us. Up against chaps like Jock I seem to be an old fool in his proper place, pottering in a shed.'

She got up and came around to him, suddenly taking his hand.

'Hamish, you make me feel a bitch. A hard old bitch!'

'Don't be silly, you're not that. I know. You're facing things I can't. . . .'

'I get so frightened sometimes . . . this house. The feeling of being set in it, with everything else crumbling away.'

'Don't you think I know? And I know what you're trying to do, too. At the same time let's not look at it that way. Sheina's a nice gal. She'll be all right for Colin, maybe more than all right. That's what we've got to want, isn't it?'

'Yes, of course it's what we've got to want. Hamish, I'd like to do out the study this morning, with Mrs. Menzies. It's the spring. I've got the cleaning bug. You don't mind?'

'Lord no, why should I? So long as you don't talk to me about paint.'

'There's no use, is there? I won't. Though I don't suppose we could just manage the hall this year? I was thinking of the wedding.'

'No.'

'All right, dear.'

At the manse breakfast was later, by half an hour Vivian said, looking at her bread plate:

'Sometimes I wonder if it's worth the effort. I mean . . . going on trying to lead a Christian life? Once I suppose it mattered, being up on our pedestal. The minister did stand for something in the community. Now I think they laugh at him.'

John buttered a piece of toast.

'You mean they laugh at you?'

'Perhaps. I feel exposed all the time. It's part of my nature. I never thought of myself as a model for anything before I married you. And then the role was pushed on me. Are you going to christen Mary Wood's child?'

'Yes,' John said, crunching toast. He had strong teeth and made a noise over it.

'I daresay you've lost count, but I haven't. It's her fourth. Are you going to try and find the father?'

'No.'

'John! How can you sit there eating toast and say you're not going to try and find the father?'

'Looking for a specific fornicator in this Royal and Ancient Burgh is a

task I might have embarked on twenty years ago. But not any longer.'

'John, that sounds horribly cynical!'

He took a sip of tea, rinsed away the toast, and then smiled at his wife.

'There comes a time in the life of most of us who are ordained when we adopt what can only be called a Christian realism. We don't condone sin, we just accept the scale on which it operates, without trying to diminish the truth in our minds. This may seem a sign of flagging zeal but it needn't be.'

'But . . . are you going to talk to Mary?'

'Yes.'

'What will you say to her? Her fourth illegitimate child!'

'I'll point out that it's nice to have a man about the house . . . on a permanent basis. He can help with the chores.'

'Oh! You're laughing at me! All these years! My weekly meetings. They're still a torture, do you know that? I shiver before I go into a hall where the women are waiting. It's still an ordeal for me to meet all those eyes. It's as though they were all switched on suddenly, and all at me.'

'I think, Vivian, that it might be as well for you to go through to the Clyde for a holiday.'

'You always suggest a holiday at my sister's when I show any signs of facing up to the realities of our life.'

He smiled.

'That's when you need a holiday. You're rather hogging the marmalade, Vivian.'

'Are you going to see Mary this morning?'

'Possibly.'

'It makes it so much worse that she's really a very nice girl. Men just take advantage of her.'

'My dear, don't be silly. There's no excuse for that from you. You've lived in Kilrudderie for twenty years.'

'I suppose you mean she . . . she co-operates?'

'I'm perfectly certain of it.'

'Oh,' Vivian said, getting up.

She went over to the fireplace and switched off one bar of the electric heater. She moved a vase on the mantelpiece and stared at the clock which had stopped ticking fourteen years before. There was grey in her hair and she was thin and erect, with a long back that

only seemed to bend when she was gardening. At the moment she was wanting a cigarette, remembering that she had stopped smoking seven years before and regretted it ever since. You never quite got over that horrible craving lust for a cigarette after breakfast. She let the word 'lust' into her mind, and allowed it to sit there and looked at it slightly askance, because it was one of the things she was afraid of.

There was a brick wall around her life and her position but no gate in it you could walk quietly through. The only thing you could do would be to jump over and that would mean a state of panic never quite reached, because when the signs became apparent John had always sent her away to her sister on the Clyde. And once there she had immediately begun to want back, enduring an emptiness without her husband.

Sometimes she thought it would have been better if he had been a man of obvious prayer, if he had sanctified every meal they had together with a grace which cut them off from sinners who took what the Lord gave and never even nodded towards Him. John had the reputation in the town of being free with his prayer, but this didn't seem to extend to his home life at all. She wondered if he prayed about her.

John rose.

'I hate to say this. But there were lumps in the porridge again.'

'I'm sorry.' She stiffened. 'If you'd let me use the packaged stuff there wouldn't be.'

'I don't like the packaged stuff. Porridge is about all that's left of Scotland. I won't have it pre-digested for me by the English.'

'That's really your argument against bishops and union with the Episcopalians.'

'Shrewd of you, Vivian. Quite right. I shan't be in for coffee.'

'I suppose you'll be with one of your old ladies?'

'Most likely.'

She nearly said she was glad he wouldn't be in for coffee. A minister's wife faced endless meals for her husband as well as the Women's Guild. She had him always for lunch and on sermon days this also meant silence and a kind of gloom emanating from his communion, or whatever it was.

She wondered then how he started a sermon. Was it with a prayer . . . 'Dear Lord, make this hit them!'? But somehow most of his sermons didn't sound heavily prayed over. She had heard of ministers'

wives these days who, even without the excuse of children, managed to skip the evening service. She wished she had the courage.

She didn't have any courage at all, of course. She had been born without this vital piece of character equipment. Her core was soft and formless which turned any protest she made about life into a whine, when she hadn't meant to whine at all.

Long ago she had given up wondering whether John loved her; he probably had the consolation of loving God. Though she knew she had failed him as a wife, from her fears, from her failure to have children. He wanted children on eight hundred and fifty pounds a year, which wasn't very practical, but then perhaps you didn't need to be if you had the Lord within reach.

The Lord wasn't within her reach, He never had been.

The front door shut noisily and at once Vivian gave way to temptation, leaving the breakfast dishes, and going out straight to her garden where the season's new growth was rising. It was a place enclosed by high walls to keep out the winds, but it might have been for privacy too, and sometimes out here she didn't want any more than this, the thing she had made and worked over, with only three hours help once a week. For fifty yards along one grey stone wall was the herbaceous border and it had taken her all of twenty years to get it right, growing every plant from seed, and selecting and re-selecting. Now everyone complimented her on this thing she had made. It was her weakness to take people out on the slightest excuse and show it and in high summer it was a glowing triumph, an exquisite personal pleasure.

John scarcely looked at that border when he was mowing the grass, which he did sometimes, rather badly.

She was worried about her phlox, the new hybrids, but from seed produced in England and temperamental up here, good for a season, but going brown and wizened the next. They had the proper treatment, the necessary thinning, the right applications of ripe manure water, but they still mocked her with temperament. It was a continual irritation, for the border had to be a success, complete, without flaws.

She heard the front door bell, faintly, at a great distance, and had to run for it, panting a little. It was the post, she knew, and the post always brought hope, a little flurry of it, a little gamble with the world beyond Kildrummy from which good might yet come. Vivian had bought ten premium bonds ~~without telling~~ John, because she wasn't sure of his position ~~in gambling,~~ whether that was gambling.

Sometimes, reading the numbers in the paper . . . never her number . . . she had the feeling that if she won a thousand pounds she could believe in God. This was almost certainly sin, but it was there.

'Morning, Mrs. McCall. Fine day. Looks like keeping up.'

The postie was professionally cheerful, with a loud voice, and a weather prophet. A lot of people in Kilrudderie wouldn't do a washing before they got his forecast.

'How are you, Mr. McPherson?'

'Och, fine. 'Cept for my feet. I'm going for mustard baths, ye ken. The old ideas is the best. I think it's helping me.'

He held out the Scottish Church magazine, two bills and a begging circular. One glance was enough for Vivian. Hope died, leaving a chill where it had been.

'Heard the news?'

'I don't think . . .'

Gossip at the door had to be discouraged.

'Elsie Garr's back.'

Vivian drew in her breath.

'You mean . . . ?'

'Aye, her. The porter at the station saw her. Back wi' her old man. And left it a bit late, I'm thinking. He disnae ken onybody. Still, it's no bad weather for a funeral. Not like the winter. I'm that sorry for the Minister then wi' our winds. It's a miracle he disnae get his death. Wonder what she'll do here? That's what everyone's asking.'

'I've got to go, I've got a kettle. . . .'

'Aye.' He grinned at her.

He began to whistle as she closed the door. Vivian stood on the other side of it, in that hall which still held its winter chill.

There was no television in the manse but she had seen Elsie Garr featured in a programme, the Kilrudderie girl who didn't look like that any more, with the lights on her, in a shimmering tight dress that was cut as low as it could be to show her big breasts. Vivian remembered the girl's voice, too, rich and deep, contralto adapted for the pop market.

She couldn't see that girl back here, in a little house down a narrow close, waiting for her father to die. It didn't seem possible. After what had happened it was madness for Elsie Garr to think she could come home.

She'd escaped once. Why come back?

3

MISS BEALE rose to greet John McCall. She was getting a bit shaky on her thin legs now, he noticed, nearing ninety, but there was no hint of weakness in her voice, no quaver.

'Minister, come along in, come along.'

Jessie shut the door behind him. She was almost as old as her mistress, and there was a kind of competition between them as to who would go to the churchyard first. Miss Beale held that this was her right, for she had a plot booked, and a blank space waiting on a vast family memorial. She was the last of the Beales left in Kilmallock and knew that the world would end when she finally went. It was already ending, really, the disintegration sharply apparent. There were few left in the town worth knowing, the real people gone, a lot of retired incomers in the bungalows that climbed up a hill where there had been no houses in her day.

Miss Beale was surrounded by relics of a solid past, Victorian furniture and knick-knacks on which she set astronomic value but which a dealer would have to be paid to take away. All her chairs were a mortification of the flesh, particularly the guest chair, which was a rocker covered in plush and set on an immovable pedestal. John sat on it because he knew he had to and at once it complained at having to support one so unworthy of the high office to which he had been called.

'Well, Miss Beale, it looks like we really have spring at last.'

'I'll never see another,' she said, with vigour. 'I was out in the garden this morning. Looking at things. But nothing's coming well. I can't get a decent man. Do you know what Henderson costs me? A pound a day. Think of that, a pound a day! In Kilmallock! I said to Jessie we just ought to let the garden go. But she won't hear of it. Silly old fool. Greedy, that's what she is. Likes her strawberries. You should see the way she watches those beds. At her time of life. And the house is dirty, too. I have to get that Parker woman in to give it a decent clean.'

'I do all I can manage,' Jessie said loudly, from the doorway.

She brought two cups of coffee and set them, with a plate of

chocolate biscuits, on a table which had mahogany stalactites appearing beneath a fringed cover.

'In my day you wouldn't have talked back,' Miss Beale said.

There were times when John felt that one of the pains of an after life would be meeting up with Miss Beale again. She was his most aggressive Christian, but there was a kind of consolation in the fact that she probably wouldn't find him at all acceptable in her heaven. He knew that after twenty years of trying to minister to this parish he remained, for Miss Beale, that young man who couldn't preach for toffee. And very often during these sessions with the old woman he was made aware of the fact that though he believed in God, and God's power to man, he didn't believe in a personal survival. Occasionally he had the nervous feeling that Miss Beale was on the point of digging this heresy out of him and enlivening her latter days with a witch hunt.

Kilrudderie had, when this was fashionable, burned a lot of witches, indeed the area had abounded in covens, and there was a chapter in local history devoted to confessions of alliance with the Satanic forces. From the ancient pulpit John still used, worthies of the Church had called for the purge of fire in dealing with the Devil's helpers. Sometimes at night, in the narrow little wynds of the old town, coming home from the sick or dying, he had the feeling that history couldn't be neatly compartmented, that the past had fingers on the present.

'What are you going to do about it?' Miss Beale asked suddenly.
'That Garr girl?'

John knew nothing. He was soon enlightened.

'She's a whore,' Miss Beale said, using with satisfaction the word for which there was Old Testament authority.

He felt then a little sickened, as though with this old woman and some others, but particularly with her, all the assumed neutrality of his function was pushed to one side, leaving only the angry man. The Protestant minister is but shakily the priest and his power, if he has any, is personal. He hasn't really the support of office in his role, there is nothing into which he can withdraw for perspective.

John needed that perspective now, and the ability to take from it pity for this old woman who would have been very startled to have it offered her. He felt again that Protestant righteousness in this form is really a kind of brutality, devoid of any element of humility at all.

He would have liked then to have had the power to demand penance from Miss Beale who had never in her life had the slightest understanding of what the word meant.

All he could offer was his anger, grating against the rigid certainties of her coherence. She was contemptuous of the world in which she still remained, not because of the imminence of her dissolution, but because of change with which she had no patience.

To the old woman Elsie Garr represented that change, a flaunting of it, and the almost black eyes opposite John were hard with a kind of deep bitterness.

'Will you go and see her?'

'Certainly. I was going to her father this morning.'

'The poor old man. The poor, wretched old man. And one of your Elders. Straight as straight. That's what my father used to say about Archie when he was a young man. And my father knew a man for what he was. To have a daughter like that! Becoming the scum of London.'

When he could, which was soon, John left the house, going out into the respectable street beyond it, where all the building was in solemn stone, the windows curtained and discreet, with a preserved silence only disrupted by the cry of the fishmonger from his motor-van. There were times when he liked this street, its air of continuing order and calm, but not this morning. This morning he walked, still angry, past windows which would note his passage. The clock on the town hall chimed for him, a curious tone, rather thin and high and desperate, like a Scots tenor.

He met many people and was greeted by nearly all, but most showed a kind of furtive fear that he would stop to talk, perhaps to tax them with a slackness in their Sunday observance. He had never, in his twenty years, made a practice of approaching his parishioners publicly for this purpose, but a latent fear seemed to remain, vestigial from another time when the rebuke of God's servant was to be feared, even dreaded.

John, in his heart, could never blame anyone for not going to church. There were Sundays when he found it a chore himself, mounting the pulpit steps, after the beadle's portentous entry, with the certain knowledge that he was a hollow man, highly unlikely to be blessed with the Almighty's particular mercy on that morning. These were the times when he preached from his head, and the top

of it at that, a froth of rhetoric which left his own spirit leaden and could scarcely be expected to stir much reaction from the pews beneath him. On these occasions he was very conscious of their faces individually, his eyes moving from one expression of resigned resentment to another. The invariable exception was Mrs. Godwin, the leader of the choir, a godly woman in spite of an English husband who claimed to be a Buddhist and spent his retirement growing sweet peas. Mrs. Godwin had always lived eager for the truth, without ever quite grasping even a portion of it, but she sat expectant through all services, half-smiling, alert for invisible cherubims.

John walked along the High Street, amongst the shoppers, a man in his late forties, with dark hair thinning slightly at the back, not very tall and not very neat, wearing a somewhat crumpled blue suit which was replaced every three years from a hanger in a chain tailors for eleven pounds, eighteen shillings and sixpence. For him the dog collar remained a trial, he felt it the badge of an authority he had never quite been able to reach. Often, wearing it, he went to a duty with a warmth in his heart that wasn't found acceptable.

He didn't expect to have it found acceptable this morning, though the warmth was there. He remembered Elsie Garr as a schoolgirl, with that surprisingly rich voice she really should have had properly trained, singing in a town concert. The applause for her had started then, and it had gone on, mounting, putting her in front of cameras to offer not so much that voice as sex. She had been very good at it; he had sat with Vivian one night watching, noting the training of another kind, the invitation of the half-smile, and her hips moving. Vivian hadn't liked it at all. John, in honesty, couldn't pretend that he was repelled; what she offered was simple and reasonable enough; it was the studied emphasis, the suggestion of complete subjection to what she was doing which had troubled him. In its way it had been as violent as watching a negress revolve a naked stomach as a kind of preface to what was intended when the curtain fell.

A failure in his own sex life, he had no resentment of success here with others. He was quite prepared to accept that the average ploughman in his parish was a better man in bed, because a sounder animal. It was difficult indeed for a minister to be a sound animal and, unless she had a peculiar vocation for her role, which was rare, this made it hard for a minister's wife. It had certainly made it hard for Vivian, bringing them both to a position too quickly where they tucked

away a vital portion of living and pretended the rest was whole.

John turned into the close which held Archie Garr's house. He said a prayer with his eyes open, a practice which was routine with him but only on occasion effective, perhaps because even in his faith, which was completely real, he had no glowing confidence in himself as the Lord's instrument. Sometimes, perhaps, but as a regular thing . . . no. He asked now for a break through which he didn't expect to get. He went in the gate and up to the door and sounded that raucous knocker.

And then he was sharply nervous, standing waiting. This door was overlooked by three sets of windows. In one of them, at least, his presence here would be recorded. He had visited Archie nearly every day since his illness, but this was something different, a peculiar occasion. Mrs. Barter, in Braecroft, a great watcher of the world from her own seclusion, would very likely soon be on the telephone to Mrs. Hopeton at the ironmonger's. It would then be round the town. The estimate of the time he had stayed would snowball, until by tonight it would have become something in the nature of a visitation. It was unlikely that the popular version would have him on his knees for most of the time by the old man's bed, with Elsie also on hers near at hand.

The door opened. He was surprised by her appearance. It was as though in coming back to Kilrudderie Elsie Garr had completely put off the city she had left behind. She was wearing a skirt which was distinctly old, and a grey sweater. She looked somehow subdued and diminished, but at the same time with all defences up, a kind of hardness and her eyes challenging.

'Do you remember me, Elsie?'

'Yes.'

He tried then to keep out of his voice the tone of faint unction which continually threatens the professionally godly, something not easy when you reject the jocular alternative. You are not quite ordinary because of your labels and to sound like a normal human being is supremely difficult.

'I've come to see your father. I've been visiting him regularly.'

'He won't know you.'

'I'm aware of that. But I'd still like to go to him, if you don't mind? He may have moments of consciousness of which we know nothing.'

Those words, as they came out, seemed to John to ring with pomposity. He sounded on holy duty bent, a ritualist not to be deflected from the pattern. You prayed by the beds of those who couldn't listen, committing them to the love of God, and then moved on to the next. As though for the first time John was suddenly able to admit to himself that he had never liked Archie Garr. His most respected Elder had always brought to his duties a massive piety of observance in which there was no flaw to be detected, and no hint of humanity either. The man's own generation had liked Archie Garr's formality, the black suit always worn for taking round Communion cards, the talk of the weather and God's providence. Miss Beale would have no one else.

'Archie brings the old church into my house,' she had said loudly on more than one occasion.

A minister inherits his Elders, and only time allows him his chance at selection. By the time he gets his chance he may well have the feeling that it is too late.

'This way then,' Elsie said, standing back in the narrow hall.

John made for the stairs, hoping she wouldn't come with him, but she did. Elsie followed him into the bedroom and for a moment they stood almost together, two of the living watching the near dead.

John looked at the girl. Her eyes were calm, no hostility now, a suggestion of curiosity, as though she was waiting for his action, ready to take a kind of pleasure from her private comment on it. She was challenging him, if very quietly, to get on with the ritual, since it appeared important to him.

'Well, Archie,' John said loudly, addressing the sentient corpse.

Even a small room can produce echoes and this one took his voice and amplified it. The sound was almost frightening where there had been only a thin wheeze of breathing. Archie's head jerked on the pillow, and those eyes which seemed to be hunting for something flicked about without focusing at all.

Elsie set a chair for him, and John smiled his thanks and what he meant for a dismissal, too. But she stayed, her arms at her side, waiting.

John reached out and took the old man's hand, feeling the dry skin, the flaccid touch of fingers that were like a baby's, liable to sudden, convulsive and undirected contractions. One of these happened then,

almost like a message, that quick tightening and equally quick release. But it didn't mean anything, John knew that.

He looked at a wall and prayed.

'Dear God, whose mercy reaches us even when we are unaware of it, be with this man, our brother, in this his trial. Grant him a measure of Thy understanding so that he may know the peace which can only come as a gift from Thee.' It was a formula prayer, the kind that came from training, and was as much a product of technical dexterity as the surgeon's first sure stroke with a scalpel. And as soon as it was said John had the feeling that this was exactly what Elsie had been expecting, though she was perhaps a little startled by the brevity. He didn't want to look at her, or at anything in that room, aware of the failure that was in himself again. He had a duty which, because of his belief, was real and whole and always waiting, and he only laid hold of it in spasms. More often he was just the man in a dog collar from whose mouth popped words which seemed both remote from himself and from his purpose.

'Is that all?' Elsie asked then, as though he had been called in by someone else for a bit of exorcism.

'Yes, I think so.'

In the lower hall she relented, her manner altering to the point where she smiled.

'The kettle is on. Would you like a cup of tea? Father doesn't get fed for a little yet.'

To refuse would have been to turn from opportunity, and though he wanted to do this, knowing the morning was sterile for him, he went with her into the kitchen, watching while she moved about with a kind of steady, neutral competence. She might have been someone hired for this role, working until the moment when the clock gave her a release. She put out the best china and the inevitable plate of chocolate biscuits that the clergy come to dread.

He sat down in her father's chair, which was expected of him. Elsie infused the tea.

'I don't think he'll ever know anyone again,' she said.

'Probably not.'

'In fact his life is over. He'd be quite well off in hospital.'

It was a statement. John waited for a moment and then agreed, for it was certainly true. She smiled again.

'I'll look after him. That's what I came back to do.'

'Is that all you came back to do, Elsie ?'

'Yes.'

'It couldn't be that you were looking for something here ?'

'No. What would I find here ? A girl like me ?'

'What sort of a girl are you ?'

'Ask them in the town, Minister.'

She poured his tea, and then a cup for herself. She was polite now, with the kind of slightly embarrassed reserve one might have expected from a farm girl. It was hard to see her in the glittering dress, selling sex. Elsic Garr might never have left Kilrudderie, she could have gone from school into the draper's and Saturday night dances, and Wednesdays at the Odeon. She could have been courting for the second time because her first had got someone else with child.

'Elsie, people in a small place are always jealous of their own who go away and do well for themselves.'

She sipped her tea.

'Would you say I did well for myself? Did you ever see me, Minister ?'

'Yes.'

She smiled. She put the cup on the table.

'All right. No need to say it. What I did wouldn't have gone down at the Women's Guild.'

'There's a lot of life that wouldn't.'

John didn't like his own tone then. He was the minister who knew all about sin and had made a profession of looking at it without blenching. He was stretching generosity to the point where it could include her, and being nice about it. It wasn't the kind of generosity which had anything to do with the mercy of God at all. And she wasn't talking about the thing which mattered, the disaster, so sudden, catching and exposing her. He was sure she wouldn't talk about it. That was where the hurt lay. It was the kind of nakedness, exposure in it, which most people escape all their lives. And few can stand it when it happens. John wasn't at all sure he could have stood it himself.

'Elsie, when I prayed just now up there it wasn't a very good prayer. It wasn't from my heart. It was something you do at a set time or in set circumstances. They're often the worst.'

She was looking at him, in surprise, and with interest, too, for the first time.

'Did you like my father ?'

She spoke as though he was dead. It was the feeling he had, too.

'I never really knew him well.'

'You had him for your Elder all your days here.'

'Still I didn't know him well.'

'I did,' she said, and picked up her cup again.

She held it with both hands, as though feeling for the warmth of the porcelain.

'He wouldn't have let me back,' she said. 'He wouldn't have let me come if he could have stopped it.'

John was seeing then the Scot in her, the service to duty which must not be denied, given often in cold blood, and without compassion, but given. 'No one will ever say that I didn't do what I could.' How often he had heard that, the simple justification of a service rendered largely because one expected to receive it back in kind when the time came. The dying needed the service of their own kin because it had always been so, something residual from a society closer knit than ours. The hospitals were there to receive the worn bodies, but you didn't use them if you could help, from a kind of pride. You took up your burden grimly and endured.

Whatever had brought her here, she was just enduring now.

'Will you go back to London?' he asked.

'I don't know. I might go to Glasgow. I can get a job there. I can type.'

'You can sing, too, Elsie.'

'No!' Then: 'I think I heard him. He makes a sound like that. He's not really calling. But he needs something.'

She went, up the stairs, and John let himself out of the house.

Elsie came down the stairs, slowly. Then at the foot of them she began to hurry, into the kitchen, over to the sink. She turned on the tap and found soap, washing her hands, taking the nail brush and scrubbing her fingers, bending over a little and breathing hard.

The front door slammed.

'Well, how're you getting on?' Morag asked. 'Making out wi' the old man? The nurse would show you what to do? Och, it's not that bad. I see you had the Minister. Did he put up a prayer for him?'

'Yes,' Elsie said, turning with the towel in her hands.

'Aye, he would. You can count on it, I'll say that. Right quick he was, too. I see you made him tea. Have a wee talk, like?'

'You could call it that.'

'Oh, well, you're managing then. I thought I'd just see. And I've got news. Mind if I pour masel a cup? The pot's still hot.'

'Do.'

'You haven't asked what my news is? Jock Innis will be here in a day or so. From America.'

Morag looked up and Elsie wasn't ready for that. Her hands had stopped using the towel, tightening into it. To Morag's eye the girl's face went rigid. She was already pale. A positive reaction to the news, hoped for, was apparent.

It looked almost as though Elsie was standing there fighting the very idea of her man coming to be near her. And he was her man, of course, for all he'd juked out nippily enough when the trial came on and his name hadn't come into it at all. Everyone in Kilmuirderie knew that Jock Innis had been her fancy man. The one she shot in her flat must have been something on the side. He might have been something Elsie didn't want Jock to know about. A proper carry on, the whole business.

Morag walked to the draining-board to get herself a kitchen cup for her tea. She had to go past Elsie to get it and she looked at the girl, quickly.

Stunned like, the way she was standing there. Oh, this would be something to tell them!

'Did you think he was in America for good, then?'

'I . . . I didn't know.'

'Och, he had to come back here, ye ken. There's talk of big changes up there at Scotsroofs. All kinds of things happening to it. The old man's after Ferguson's field, the one that was for a school playing-ground. The Cooncil's angry about that, they don't want to gie it to him. But what I says is, what can ye dae? I mean to say, Scotsroofs is our business here, isn't it? I mean, if they's expanding, well it'll mean more jobs. What's a field? The kiddies can play somewhere else.'

'I don't . . . know what you're talking about.'

'Och, it's just about what the Innis family's up to. Getting on in the world, that's what you'd say. As if they haven't enough money already. Rollin', that's what they are. And there's nothin' an Innis can't buy wi' it. You should see her these days. Eliza she ca's herself. Eliza, would you believe it? Plain Lizzie Bain all her days but Lizzie disnae go so well wi' a Bentley!'

Elsie had gone to a chair by the range and sat in it.

'Lizzie Bain?' she said.

'Aye, Lizzie Innis that was Bain. From over Westbrae's. She was a fairmer's daughter afore she got Will. But you kent that, surely?'

'Yes, I suppose so.'

'Nae money wi' her, they say. Her old man was bust flat. Terrible bad fairmer. It was a good place, too, and he let it go down something shocking. Sending Lizzic to the dancing school in Perth. They was aye for getting on, them Bains. Wi'oot working for it, ye ken.'

Morag was pleased with herself. She had established easy access to this house, for all her apparent banishment from it after so long. She could walk in when she wanted, with her bit of cheer.

'How are you getting on wi' his dinner, Elsie? Mind you, there's nae need to be fussy. A bit of mince, and ye mash it down smooth like. He takes it fine. You'd think he was enjoying himsel. Well, I'll away.'

4

THE office block at Scotsroofs, Ltd., was in itself an advertisement for modern building techniques, only two stories high, but glittering, poured concrete and steel, with prefabricated wooden sections and floor-length, double plate-glass windows. Will Innis sat in against a slab of polished cedar, indirectly lit when necessary, his chair Swedish, the carpet underfoot contemporary Wilton in a dull grey tone. In recent years Will had taken to smoking cigars during office hours and there was a pungent aroma of affluence the moment you opened his door, sometimes challenged by the dry, male tang of whisky.

Jock had designed the office but Will had come to accept it, as he invariably accepted change after a period of routine protest. It was change which had presented him with the solid position in life he now held, change seized and used. On one wall, challenging the decor, but clung to, was a large photograph of what Scotsroofs had looked like before the Second World War. Will gazed at that sometimes, through cigar smoke.

The building was on a hill, with the sprawling works behind it, but the offices claiming the view which included almost the whole of Kilmarnock and the broad strath beyond it, fifteen miles wide, which rose again slowly to more uplands. In the valley, at a distance, ran the trains for the north, for Aberdeen, the smoke of them suspended sometimes in long, slowly dissipating horizontal columns of white. Dundee was twenty-two miles away to the south-west, over those low hills, and Perth only half an hour in a car.

It was a good setting for a man who knew his business, particularly a local man, enough labour available without too much, which meant that other industries weren't automatically attracted. The town, too, in size, lent itself to dictation and was even prepared on occasion to regard its richest citizen as a benefactor. Will supported the Presbyterian Church of Scotland, Rotary, the British Legion and the nearby orphanage for the sons of members of the Armed Forces. In his youth he had been a scratch player over the famous Kilmarnock hill course and even now had a handicap of eight.

He was a compact man of five feet nine, with a head which went

almost straight into his shoulders, bald so long and so naturally that it was difficult to imagine him with hair, clean-shaven, with the features of a boxer who has had the sense to get out of the game soon enough. His large, square-fingered hands were on the desk in front of him now, one of them holding a lit cigar. It was twelve-twenty by the electric wall-clock.

Will had been thinking about his lunch for five minutes. He wondered sometimes if the increasing importance of food to him was, at sixty-seven, a symptom of old age, or just of prosperity. It was certainly true that now, in a manner unknown in earlier years, he more and more frequently sat and allowed time to come running up to him, and he felt that this was probably part of the general weakening.

It wasn't always food he thought about, either, in these lulls, sometimes it was death. Someone had once said to him that only the prosperous really had the time to fear death, that the rest mostly escape this in their fears of living. It had stuck in his memory, like a tag, a piece of old-fashioned embroidered lettering in the modern, painstakingly up-to-date decor of his mind.

He could afford the pauses he didn't really enjoy. He had only to turn his head to look out through walls of glass at the evidence of his own firm establishment on a hillside, to the ornamental garden sweep of the entrance area where a man he had known at Kilrudderie school worked full time and where the black Bentley, which had cost seven thousand pounds, always sat waiting, in itself a nice shiny piece of advertising.

He was a rich man by any standards north of a line between Edinburgh and Glasgow, and not poor south of that either. He had a personal estate of some three hundred and seventy thousand pounds in blue chips and at least double that again in the business, a millionaire if he sold up, and all from native wit applied to native materials and at home.

A Scotsman of the Scotsmen he had once described himself on a Burns night after the sixth whisky and, though maudlin, it was true. He had resisted pressures that at times had been strong to remove his plant and processes to one of the London industrial suburbs and once his reply had been emphatic. 'I am not turning Scotsroofs into bloody English roofs.' Though, of course, from his home base he had been quite prepared to do business down there, and did a great deal, prefabricating recently an entire housing scheme on the out-

skirts of Coventry, more poured concrete and steel which an English designer of contemporary cathedrals had called in the *Architectural Review* . . . 'an abomination of Celtic pan-mysticism in modernist idiom'. Will kept a cutting of that in his top right-hand drawer.

The Scotsroofs canteen was almost certainly offering sausages and though a democratic man from his earliest years, he had recently begun to temper principle with a consideration for his digestion. He never went home to lunch, arguing that meeting women in the middle of the day almost invariably meant an unproductive afternoon. Now he wondered whether the run to the Station Hotel at Perth would be worth the effort, and had almost decided it would when a car came surging in through the gates, his wife's Hillman.

Will sat up very straight, staring in disbelief. For Lizzie, recently Eliza, he had always made a point of maintaining a very high regard, but this was founded on a series of taboos as far as she was concerned. One of them was that she left Scotsroofs alone even under the direst of emergencies. She was permitted to phone, but not to visit.

'What the devil . . . ?' he said out loud, watching her park the highly coloured car straight across the glass entrance area.

He flicked a lever. 'Alice, let her in.'

'What's that, sir?'

'My wife. Can't you see her? Let her in.'

Eliza came in. She might have been dressed for a morning in Edinburgh, and to make the Capital look provincial. Her dress was grey, tight at the knees, elaborately shapeless higher up, and with a draped neck. She wore a hat with a narrow brim from which rose what looked like a partially inflated balloon. On the whole the effect was successful, but there was a suggestion of strain, too, of the Scots wife hidden away somewhere beneath it.

'I knew you wouldn't like this,' she said. 'But I couldn't help it.'

Eliza's voice had suffered various repressions with advancing prosperity and social status, at one time threatened with strangulation, but now emerging as something distinctly her own. It had certainly eliminated the farmer's daughter who had been sent to dancing lessons in Perth.

'You'd better sit down,' Will said, reluctantly.

She smiled at him, as though in some way that amused her. She sat down, careful about her legs, which were still good, and which the dress showed to above the knee. She put her hands on a crocodile

handbag and looked at her husband from under the hat, her small features somehow tight.

'Will, there's trouble. Elsie Garr is back in Kilmallock. I've been thinking about this all morning. I'm quite sure now that it's something Jock arranged.'

He stared at her, completely winded, and then slowly his heavy features arranged themselves into an expression of outraged paternal feeling.

'What the hell do you mean?'

'Please don't start bellowing. It's not an easy thing to have to say to you. But I believe that it's the truth. Or near it, at any rate.'

'I don't! Jock would never . . .'

'Jock will do what he likes.'

'Have a care what you say about my son, Lizzie!'

'Your son! Sometimes it's almost as if I hadn't been involved. But I was. He's mine, too, and I know him.'

'Not as well as I do. He wouldn't have done this. He wouldn't have brought that girl here just now.'

'I wonder? What about London? Certainly it's a long way from Kilmallock. But he didn't make any bones about it, did he? He never tried to hide that she was his mistress.'

'He's not the hiding sort.'

'I only wish he had been. For all our sakes. I've had enough, Will. It's Sheina I'm thinking about now. I want her happy.'

'You want her married to a Fairway-Campbell, you mean.'

'That's not true! I love my daughter. I want her happiness. I know she'll find it with Colin.'

'You kilted wonder.'

'You're prejudiced against him. You always have been. But he's the kind of man for Sheina.'

'I shouldn't wonder but what you're right there. Maybe I'm hard on the man. He can't help being a son of his father.'

'The Colonel has a distinguished . . .'

'Och, don't give me his military history. I ken fine what he was.'

'I wish you wouldn't lapse into Scots when you're angry.'

'Well, I always have, and I always will.'

They stared at each other. The wave of anger receded, and Eliza seemed to wait for it to do this. She said, in a different tone:

'You're not really so sure of Jock, are you? Look at it calmly, Will. He might have brought the girl here.'

Will didn't answer. He stared at the polished cedar and wondered if he did believe Jock could have done it. A moment ago he had come automatically to his son's defence, now under his wife's eyes he wasn't so sure. In recent years he had felt increasingly that he couldn't make any safe predictions about the boy, and there were times when it seemed that Jock was making his life on a different level, away from them, going about it quietly still as though he knew his time hadn't come yet.

As a business man Will couldn't have wanted a better heir. Jock was always shrewd, alert to a good deal that his father might have missed now. Scotsroofs certainly wouldn't go down under him.

'I was wondering if we could deal with the girl,' Eliza said.

'Eh? How?'

'She was making a lot of money once. But the trial would take most of that. I shouldn't think she has much.'

'I see. I'm to go down there with a wee cash present and say beat it? Don't be daft, Lizzie! Supposing it didn't work, and it probably wouldn't. The whole town would know I'd tried to buy Elsie off.'

'Not if you were discreet enough.'

'Discreet? In this place. My God. I'd be a laughing stock in no time.'

'We've still got to get that girl out of town, Will.'

'No, that's no good. The only way's Jock. I'll put the screws on him. He's not to go near her. And I can't believe he ever meant to go near her, not in a place like this.'

'Can't you?' said Eliza quietly, looking at the carpet beyond the toe of her pointed shoe.

'You've got a down on Jock!' Will roared.

She still didn't look at him.

'I've given up with Jock, that's all.'

'Yer. 've never understood the boy!'

'I sometimes think I'm the only one in the family who ever has. Sheina has her Jock, like you. And I've never said anything to spoil her picture.'

He glared.

'I like you sitting there, talking like that. What have you done all these years, with your fancy clothes and your getting to know the

right people? Jock doesn't give a damn for your world, why the hell should he?

'My world, you call it.' She stood. She was taller than her husband by an inch. 'I had to do something, didn't I? You never had need of me, you or Jock.'

'Lizzie, don't go! I won't have you saying these things, do you hear? You're not walking out on me like this. You've wrecked my morning, aye, ruined my day, that's what you've done.'

'I'm sorry. I came here in a kind of panic. I felt I had to make you do something.'

'Well, I will do something. I'll tell Jock he's not to go near that girl!'

'And suppose he just smiles at you?'

'Are you saying I've no power over my own son?'

'None of us have any power over Jock.'

And then she went out. Will got up from his desk to watch his wife go to her car. The glass walls made it like looking at a stranger, a woman over fifty with bags of money behind her, who ran around in her own Hillman when her man was using the Bentley. Lizzie glanced up from switching on the engine and saw him behind his glass wall, but she gave no sign. She drove away, jerking the car through the gears, driving badly as she always did.

Jock Innis lay naked along a three-place sofa covered in white washable plastic. There was a lot of black hair on his body, his arms, his chest and down into his stomach, but under this shagginess were neat, tight muscles. He had his head turned, watching Susie, who stood at a bar mixing drinks, wearing a Japanese airlines free issue 'haori' coat and nothing else. The coat was bright blue, with a coolie monogram on the back, and it just managed to cover a nicely rounded bottom.

The room was luxe, lit now only by twin alabaster lamps with white nylon shades and a glow over the bar. The furniture was low, an Oriental feel predominant in the decor, one wall with a picture of a monkey on a palm tree. French windows opened on to a little terrace fourteen stories above the pavement. Susie came expensive, even for a tired business man's last evening in America.

She turned and moved towards him, carrying the highballs, frowning at them, her blonde hair tousled, swaying a little on stiletto

heels. A tart always gets into her shoes, Jock thought. It was instinctive with them.

'Move over, honey,' she said.

He hunched himself up, arms about his knees, to let her sit down, and then he pushed his shoulders back over her bare thighs.

'That's not comfortable for me,' Susie said.

'So what?'

'Don't be like that, you hairy pug.'

'Susie, you've got charm. I wear your telephone number tattooed on my heart.'

She smiled down at him. She already had youth, the smile made her fleetingly the child.

'Well, if you start distributing it over there in Scotland remember I don't take charity cases.'

'I'll remember. Pot bellies?'

'A girl's got her feelings. But they can be compensated. Tell me, do you ever wear one of those kilts over all that fur?'

'Never. We leave it to the soldier boys.'

'I thought it was kind of cute when I saw it in the pictures. You can send me one of those any time.'

'I can think of the very one,' Jock said, and laughed. 'He's getting married to my sister.'

'Look, there are some things I don't like men getting funny about.'

He lifted his head to take a drink and then put the glass on the carpet.

'Susie, did no one ever try to set you up someplace?'

'Sure, once. But he lived in Newark. It didn't take.'

'Where do you come from?'

'That depends. It can be Illinois or Ohio or Southern California. To you its Brooklyn. What are you digging for?'

'I'm going to be coming to the States a lot, Susie. Half living here.'

'I don't do any knitting,' she said, and moved under him.

He reached up and took her glass. Then his hand went to above her knee and moved towards her stomach. He turned over against her.

'Look, honey, hadn't you . . . ?'

'My plane doesn't go till two-thirty. I thought your terms were inclusive?'

'Well, there is . . . '

'Shut up, shut up.'

She cried out once. It surprised him. Afterwards he looked at her, but she avoided his eyes. She pulled the 'haori' coat about her and got up, going towards the bar again, but not for a drink.

'I'm sorry, I guess I'm tired. It's one o'clock. Hadn't you better be thinking about getting to the airport?'

He dressed behind a dragon screen, neatly placed, a little angry that she didn't like him. You had to be pretty young to show feeling in this game. Susie was pretty young. Maybe it was a daddy she wanted. He grinned at that, and came out tying his tie.

Susie was in a housecoat.

'Like a drink?'

'No thanks.'

At the door she said, like a slightly weary hostess:

'You're the most, honey.'

Jock walked on the pavement, letting taxis go by him. The traffic had thinned and it was the hour when he liked New York best, spring, but the air still sharp, giving you that feeling of being a few drinks ahead in living. He liked New York enough to want to live in it, but he wasn't ready for that yet, though it could come one day.

He wondered then what his father would think about his son and heir living in New York. It didn't fit in with any limited expansion plans for Scotsroofs Ltd., but the thing his father didn't know about those plans was that they weren't limited at all, not in the long view. Just now, of course, it was the small time, a firm with assets that could be squeezed to amount to three million dollars. If you could change that from sterling and tried to move into New York with just that backing somebody would put out a big boot and squash you. You didn't get to New York that way from Europe, you went West young man and then sneaked up on the place.

He thought about opportunity in the second half of the century. Over here the old story about the shoeshine boy who ended up owning a chain of stores still brought tears to their eyes, though the magazine which had made a business of selling that angle had folded. No one believed it any more. You needed a comfortable start these days, in America, in Britain. Daddy gave you one store and then you went on to get twenty, but you needed that one store to start off with. Hunt for the contemporary tycoon who had begun without at least a quarter of a million. What a hunt! It could happen up to

thirty years ago, but not any more. Somebody else could sell peanuts just half a cent cheaper than was economic for you to market your home-fired kind from an old shed in Passaic.

But if you had a Daddy who had been industrious in his day! Jock smiled.

A taxi drew up without being signalled and Jock looked at the negro driver for a minute, then nodded.

'Air line terminal,' he said, getting in.

His plane was B.O.A.C., and the cabin offered at once that peculiar 'You're safe with the British' feel which had been brought over from the shipping companies. If the hostess wasn't a lady she had been trained to create that illusion and took you to your seat with an untouchable graciousness. This certainly wasn't any gal who could be bounced from knee to knee on an all boys convention outing. Britannia was making her bid to rule the airlanes, too, and if she wasn't quite the first team yet she was staying right up there.

You could still sell some things with an approach of unflinching gentility; it had a novelty value for a start, but it wouldn't do for prefabricated houses. Jock fastened his safety belt, feeling suddenly sleepy. The British engines in an American frame started to warm up. He closed his eyes.

5

SOMETHING was biting the old man. Jimmy Blane stood in that cigar-scented office telling himself that it was one of these things that would blow over. There was no real question of inefficiency in the electrical department, it was the best in the plant. It wasn't like Will Innis to go on harping at a point; he usually just made it and left it.

'Now look here, Jimmy. How long have these plastic junction boxes been on the market?'

'About nine months, Mr. Innis.'

'Properly tested then? Have you heard any complaints about them?'

'I have not.'

'And you're aware of the fact that they would reduce our costs by a third on this item, maybe more?'

'I knew that, yes, Mr. Innis.'

'It didn't occur to you that it was your business to let me know about a substantial saving of this kind? Instead of letting me hear about it at a lunch in Perth?'

'Mr. Innis, I don't like those plastic boxes, that's all there is to it.'

'I seem to remember hearing you say the same thing about the plastic tubing we're using?'

'Yes. I did say that. And I meant it. I don't think it's all that satisfactory. There have been cases of rats gnawing it and causing fires.'

Will Innis leaned back in his chair. He looked weary. He brought up his hand and rubbed it over his jaw.

'I can't seem to get it through your head, Jimmy, that at Scotsroofs we are not building for posterity. Our houses are not meant to stand for ever. They'll last for twenty years and by that time people will want a new model. And don't smile at that! It's coming in Scotland, too. The days of our massive stone lumps all over the countryside are over.'

'You live in one, Mr. Innis.'

'Yes, and it costs me a damn' fortune to heat in the winter. I live in one because I'm an old fogey. But mine will be the last generation

to do it. Young people these days want something designed for living, not a bloody masonry memorial. And we give them a product as cheap as it can be offered. There's plenty of rivals in this business, Jimmy, and there's only one way I beat them, and that's by keeping my prices down! For heaven's sake man, use your loaf. I want you to get samples of those boxes and submit them to your own tests. And not tests for a half century of usefulness. We've got to get away from that kind of thinking.'

'It won't be easy for me to get away from it, Mr. Innis,' Jimmy said, with a bid for dignity.

The old man stared at him for a time.

'Go on,' he said. 'Go on back to your work.'

In the outer office Jimmy paused by Alice Wilson's desk.

'What's eating the old man?'

Alice looked interested.

'On the mat, were you? I thought so. I could hear the shouting.'

'I bet you switch on that machine and listen in.'

Alice giggled.

'So what? Anything to pass the time. I don't know what's eating him. Gave me hell over a couple of letters this morning. Said my typing had always been bloody and was getting worse. I nearly gave in my notice.'

'You wouldn't get another job like this in Kilrudderie.'

'I know. That's why I didn't. I like it here, really. I mean it's so modern. You feel somebody in a place like this. Confidential secretary. I'm just stuffed with trade secrets.'

Jimmy laughed.

'Go on! You couldn't keep one in your head for a week. All you think about is Elvis Presley.'

'I know. He sends me. I was that glad when he got out the Army. I just felt as if I was getting out of it myself. Oh, I hope he doesn't get married.'

Jimmy went on, wondering why the old man kept her. But the Kilrudderie girl who could type forty net and make a stab at shorthand was something of a find. Choice probably didn't come into it.

Choice came into it with him, though. Fifteen years ago the old man had sent for him and told him all about planned expansion at Scotsroofs. A man was needed full time to run the electrical side. It had meant giving up his own newly established business in the

High Street, but he hadn't minded that, for this was security, and there had been Clara and the future to think of.

When you looked at it squarely security counted for a lot. It was all very well running your own business, building it up, being your own boss, but you were fighting a lot of things these days, things like the Electricity Board coming in and cutting your estimate by ten per cent. The shop in the High Street might have flopped and then where would he have been? Instead there were fifteen years of steady work behind him and things to show for it that you could reach out and touch, like the car and the house.

The house was only eighteen months old, a Scotsroofs three-bedroom job, with a central patio court like they had in America. It was being paid for through a building society and in twenty-three and a quarter years they'd own it, and it would be worth three thousand pounds, maybe more, if prices went up. That was solid progress. You could call it building up your visible capital asset.

Of course the car was a wasting asset, maybe, but there was the pleasure from it. You had to count that. And then there was all the furniture and the insurance policy for a thousand pounds. They were getting on all right, Clara and he. You could look at the future and it didn't make you nervous at all. There was a lot in that.

Back at his own desk Jimmy wrote the letter to the plastics firm about the new junction box. He typed it out himself on an old Remington, with two fingers, and when it was finished it was five-fifteen, and his life was his own. As he reached the gates the Bentley came down the drive fast, the old man in it, a cigar in his mouth, but not looking at anyone.

All that money and you still chewed on a cigar like something was gnawing you. Just one twentieth of what the Innis family had or one fiftieth and he'd never work again, just pay off the house and sit in the patio playing with little Lucy and maybe digging in the garden sometimes. Or going out in the Ford Popular. That was the way to live. You sweated all your days to get a little heap of what other people threw away on a cruise to the West Indies in a luxury ship.

Still, you weren't a Red and you were getting somewhere, that was all you had to think about. It didn't do to want too much or get ideas. Maybe you wouldn't know what to do with a lot of money if you had it, the stuff would just dribble away, like it did with those people who won the football pools. There was that man who got fifty thousand

quid for sixpence, who'd gone out to one of those islands where the rich go, and then shot himself because he felt so poor alongside all those millionaires. It was the way you looked at it with money. Security's the thing you want. Just to know you're safe, you and your wife and the kiddie. As Clara said, you had to be thankful.

And Jimmy was thankful, always, when he came around that sudden corner and saw his house, or an angle of it, directly ahead. It sat in the upper part of the town, a new suburb, entirely surrounded by the conventional bungalows of people retired on pensions. Only the Scotsroofs patio house wasn't conventional at all, it announced that the people living in it had modern ideas.

It had been quite a step, taking the plunge and coming here from the Council houses, clearing right out of the working-class district. People talked about something like that in a place like Kilmuirderie, but it didn't matter how they talked when you were up here on a hill. The town was down there beneath, you saw the lights of it at night, but you were away. And from your garden you didn't see it at all, only fields, and the distant hills across the strath. Little Lucy had been much better since the move, there was no doubt about that at all. You had to think of these things, with kids, and neighbours, too, when you were running your own department and it was getting bigger all the time. He called himself a departmental manager now, not at the works, but up here in Crieff Terrace.

There was no front to the patio house at all, not in the old way, with bay windows and the best curtains. All that faced the road was a long wall, with a door to one side, a small row of kitchenette windows and the garage. The patio house had been a great success all over the country, and Scotsroofs had sold nearly eight hundred of them in two years, which was some going.

Clara opened the door before he could get out his key.

'I got here first!' she said, with a little pant of pleasure. 'I looked out and there you were!'

'Aye, so I was,' Jimmy said.

He was at once uneasy on a point of grammar but she didn't correct him so it must have been all right. Clara had been an uncer-tified school teacher and she was a careful speaker. He was getting to be a better speaker himself, not so Scots. People chaffed him about it, but he didn't mind that. Crieff Terrace made you look at some things different.

Wee Lucy was playing in the patio, a bit peckit-looking, Jimmy thought after seeing other children, but Clara said that it was because some children were naturally quiet. And it was true enough, she never made much noise these days, as though she'd got it all out of her system when she was a baby. 'My little lady', Clara called her, and it was a fact she did have manners even at three. She had only been seventeen months when they moved from the Council houses but Jimmy was sure wee Lucy had noticed the change for the better right away.

'How's ma wee hen?' Jimmy said, forgetting.

'Don't call her that, dear. It's the kind of thing that might stick.'

Jimmy straightened.

'Sorry. It'll be tea then? I'll wash.'

They rarely went out in the evening, being far from the kind of neighbours who would look after a child, but they got a great deal of pleasure from television. As Clara said it was just a question of choosing carefully and you got a lot of benefit from it. She preferred the B.B.C. because it had tone, no longer liking the commercials on the other band, and they were great watchers of plays. In the sitting-room, cut off from the patio now by double glazed doors, they both sat in contemporary chairs from a chain-store in Perth, while Clara knitted.

'I think the play might be good,' she said.

'What's it about?'

'Oh, I don't know. But I read the bit in the *Radio Times* and it sounded all right.'

It opened all right, too, there was a man killed on a flight of steps, but after that it became a bit confused. There was a boy in it who didn't belong to the Commies who had killed the man and a girl in it who was in love with the boy, but she did belong to the Commies. There was the Commie Commandant, too, who was after the girl, and it looked for a bit as though this was going to be good, but you only saw them coming out of a room, and the man looking like he'd go off to give some more orders and the girl crying.

'Can you get what it's about, Jimmy?' Clara asked, the needles clicking.

'It's got a meaning,' he said.

'Yes, I know. But what's that bird that keeps flying about?'

'It's got a meaning, too.'

Clara gave up before the end and went to make tea, but Jimmy sat

on, frowning a little, until he had read all the names of the players and the producer and the man who wrote it.

'What happened?' Clara asked, coming in with the tea.

'Oh . . . it's finished. The girl's dead and the boy's dead. The Commandant's dead, too.'

'I sec. It's just biscuits, will that do?'

Jimmy ate his biscuit. He was, in an uneasy way, still conscious of the play which had been replaced by a tour around an art gallery, the cameras staring at pictures and statuary, which presumably the viewer was supposed to do too. Perhaps it was that scene between the Commandant and the girl, which left a kind of a gap, as though a censor had cut it out. It made you want to fill things in somehow, to use your imagination.

'This is a modern work,' the curator of the gallery said with an encouraging smile. 'Personally I think it is one of the most exciting things we have.'

'Will you look at that,' Clara said, 'Exciting he calls it!'

Jimmy looked, instead, at Clara. There was no doubt about it, his wife had kept her shape all right. That was the first thing he had noticed about her, that she had one, not one of these poles to hang square dresses on. A wife was supposed to be a comfort to a man, and she was, even if she took a bit of time to warm up, especially when she wasn't expecting it.

They never usually did anything except on a Saturday night when they had the long lie after it. But suddenly he got up.

'I'll put on the gas fire,' he said.

Clara was startled.

'Whatever for? It's nearly summer.'

And then it was as if she really saw him there standing looking at her.

'You like it warm in the bedroom, don't you?' he said.

'Jimmy Blane! I've got to put my hair in curlers tonight.'

'Och, to hell with that.'

'But I'm going out to tea tomorrow with Mrs. Curtis next door. It's afternoon tea. I've got to put in my curlers. You can see that, surely?'

'You can do it after.'

He went into the bedroom, feeling slightly embarrassed, the lustful male having to contend with all the paraphernalia of established domesticity. The gas fire in their bedroom was a luxury he had planned

and insisted on for his wife, who had always longed for this kind of comfort. Now she had it, and a lot of other things as well.

The burners gave a little pop, then hissed contentedly. He could hear Clara in the kitchen, rattling cups. He undressed, folding his clothes neatly over his chair as usual, getting into the double divan without his pyjamas. He lay in it slightly propped up against his pillow, his naked arms and part of his chest exposed.

Clara was in the sitting-room now, taking longer than usual over her tidy. He heard the booming of the television cut off, then her feet in the passage. She was looking in at Lucy.

Clara came into the bedroom without glancing at him, going at once to the triple-mirrored dressing-table that was part of the walnut-veneered suite which had cost twenty pounds down and the balance over three years at a pound a month. She sat down on the stool and caught his eye in the mirror. He grinned. She gave no sign of having noticed.

In a moment she stood to undress, slowly, as if quite unconscious of him, her firm breasts bare. She slipped the chain-store, nylon, sky blue nightdress over her head and with her hands under it in some way contrived to slide out of the suspender belt that wasn't quite a corset. Then, decisively enough, she put out all the lights from the door switch.

When his hands touched her he could feel no response, as though she was still thinking about curlers and maybe a man taking them around an art gallery. She had to be reminded that there were things which mattered a lot more. For a while she wasn't with him at all and then quite suddenly she said:

'Oh, Jimmy!'

Then it was all right, it was more than all right. He lay holding her, still sweating, kissing her ear and the soft, fair hair about it. She put up her hand and took his face, turning his lips to hers. They lay like that, wanting it, both of them held together.

'Jimmy, you're a good man. You're good to me. I often think it, Jimmy. All you've done. We're getting on, aren't we?'

'Aye, we're getting on,' he said.

He ran his hands over her breasts.

'What about your curlers?'

Clara giggled.

'I'll do them in the morning.'

6

THE minister who cannot, with conviction, lay before his flock a vision of heavenly mansions for all eternity is under a grave disadvantage when it comes to writing sermons. Sometimes John felt that it would have helped if he could have sensed, even briefly, the presence of the Devil in his study mocking his unbelief.

The trouble was, really, that it wasn't unbelief at all. The cynic can write sermons easily enough and John remembered an unfrocked Canadian clergyman at Edinburgh, then studying medicine, who used to do them for a pound a time and had a wide clientele in the city. John's trouble wasn't a lack of convictions, it was the line on which they stopped, and try as he had all his life he couldn't push them beyond this line.

It had always seemed to him that Christ was a prophet of God's power in this world and that organized, even regimented, Christianity was responsible for putting the heavy emphasis on the next. At many an open grave he had said the words about the resurrection of the dead, knowing only too well that their meaning for him wasn't the popular one. It made him feel an imposter at times, almost arrogant, when all he really wanted in his heart was to be a servant. The truth as he knew it, if proclaimed, would make him seem the false shepherd, and yet how often he had wanted to proclaim it, to lean over the pulpit and say clearly and slowly to those faces:

'It doesn't matter about dust to dust, it doesn't matter if that's all. What does matter is the love of God as power within reach now, a power you have to fight for and can't even hold for long. But always there.'

Aye, always there, except when you were writing sermons.

He lit his pipe and stared at the sheets scrawled over in an illegible hand. He had to type out his notes later in order to make sense of them, and had long since been branded as a reader of his sermons. Miss Beale and the senior Elders sniffed at this. 'It's no much of a sign of the Lord's Grace when the Minister's aye peerin' doon through his specs.'

That was the verdict. There were a lot of verdicts on him. For

twenty years he had suffered from the disadvantage of being in the shoes of a highly respected predecessor, a man who had brought to his mission a sound grasp of theology, a fundamentalist, the father of seven children, whose bellowed dogmatisms still left echoes in an old building which had once heard the plainsong of monks.

You were diminished by your predecessors, by their coherence, by their passion for the simplicities of heaven and hell and not much breathing room between. John felt squeezed and uneasy sometimes on his little ledge of uncertainty about the detail of belief.

For it was detail. If every man rotted in his grave and that was the end, it wasn't the end of God. Nor of reaching out to Him, either, while you lived.

He wondered sometimes if he should have been a Unitarian, but that would mean living in a city on a very much diminished income and he funkied it. There were plenty in the Church of Scotland with thinner convictions than his who wouldn't dream of being budged by a little spiritual uncertainty, though this, of course, was no excuse. To search for excuses was a kind of admission of defeat and he didn't feel the need to admit this. You were an instrument at times, the power moved through you, and you knew it. It took your heart and never mind about your theology.

There was a knock on the door. Vivian peered round it.

'I'm sorry, John. It's Morag McFie.'

'Eh? Oh. What does she want?'

'I think she's in some kind of trouble. Or someone is. She's very upset.'

He thought then of Elsie Garr.

'You'd better show her in, Vivian.'

Morag McFie's plain face had an expression for disaster, her mouth staying open, her eyes popping, her plump cheeks somehow released from their normal tensions.

'Oh, Minister, I'm that sorry to trouble you. But I just had to come.'

'That's all right, Mrs. McFie. Sit down.'

'It's no aboot masel, ye ken. It's poor Kirsty.'

'You mean, Mrs. Wood?'

'Aye, her.'

It wasn't Elsie Garr. The feeling of relief he had then surprised him.

'She's in trouble, poor soul!'

Not Mary Wood pregnant again? It couldn't be, so soon. And anyway another pregnancy wouldn't warrant this reaction, either from Morag or the girl's mother.

'It's Tammy. The laddie.'

'Laddie' wasn't quite the word John would have used. Tammy Wood left an almost indelible impression even after one meeting. He was gangling, with huge hands pushed out of his sleeves on knobby wrists. He had a bushy, Teddy Boy haircut over a face which usually wore an unappealing expression of snarling withdrawal. You had to make an almost painfully conscious effort of charity towards Tammy.

'What's he been up to?'

'Oh, it's the polis'. They're at the hoose. Nabbed him they have. He got into the tobacconist last night an' stole five thousand cigarettes. They found them hidden in Kirsty's wood store. And she's fair distractit.'

'I see. I'll come with you now.'

'Aye. Afore they take Tammy away, like.'

The police were still questioning the youth. He sat in the front parlour, his hands tucked between his knees, looking remarkably unrepentant. Beside him was his mother, Kirsty Wood, big and slack and snivelling. When she saw John she darted forward.

'Minister! You'll stand for ma laddie, won't you? You'll go surety for him?'

'He can't do that,' the Sergeant said, nodding to John. Then to the boy. 'Were you in this alone?'

Tammy looked up, straight at the policeman. There was a feeling then, sharp to John, that this was only the beginning of a long procession of contacts between Tammy Wood and the police. It was almost unnerving, that sense of inevitability, which came as much as anything from the look in Tammy's face, a kind of solid defiance, his eyes, even in his fear, challenging.

'Did you do this alone?' the Sergeant said again.

'What's it to you?'

'Now look here, Wood, give us a statement and things won't go badly with you the first time.'

'Oh, my,' Kirsty wailed. 'The way you say that. The first time; Ma' wee laddie.'

Tammy moved, as though irritated, and snuffled. Then he put the

back of his hand up to his nose. He clearly had a cold and wasn't near tears.

'You'll come to the station with us,' the Sergeant said.

'No! You can't take my laddie frae his hoose.'

The Sergeant turned on her.

'I only want to question him in peace, that's all. We'll never get anything out of him here.'

Tammy showed no reluctance about going with them. He shambled out with the two policemen, one of them carrying the evidence in a canvas sack. The car drove off. Kirsty Wood abandoned herself to a mild round of hysterics during which they somehow all adjourned to the kitchen where Mary was waiting for them, with tea ready. There was the clatter of children in the scullery beyond, Mary's children, pushed out of the way into the back garden, but refusing to stay there. In a corner beyond the range was a crib with a healthy-looking infant lying back free of the covers, with one foot up at which it stared.

The date for the christening wasn't set; John reminded himself to fix that up before he left.

'Sit down, Mother,' Mary said. 'Just sit you down here.'

'Oh, my,' Kirsty said. 'This is a black day for us. The polis'.'

'Here's your tea,' Morag clucked. 'A good cuppa's what you need.'

John felt more than a shade unnecessary. So far the women were the comforters and he had been struggling with the feeling that there wasn't much he could say at all.

'Minister, you sit here,' Mary said, giving him a quick smile.

She was a cheerful, agreeable girl, moderately pretty in a solid way, and a member of the choir until that first error had become a shade too obvious as the young ladies, under the command of Mrs. Godwin, rose for the anthem solo. He hadn't told her to stand down; she realized herself sensibly that the time had come, but remained a sporadic attender at church, always in the evening, one more to the thin sprinkling in the pews. Often he had heard her clear, rather high soprano ring out above the general croaking, and had been oddly thankful for it. Once she had told him that she liked the hymns he chose, which wasn't the general view at all.

Mary handed him his tea. Morag was mumbling to Kirsty.

'Have you any idea what made your brother do this?' he asked.

Mary shook her head.

'Well, not really. Except he's like that.'

'What does he get as an apprentice?'

'Three pounds. It would be enough for most boys. But not our Tammy.'

Her voice was low, to screen it from her mother, but that didn't hide the tone of contempt. John didn't shirk the issue, he looked at her.

'You're rather given as a family to doing what you like, Mary.'

Her eyes dropped to the floor.

'It's different wi' me,' she whispered. 'It's only the one thing.'

He was seized with a sudden wild desire to laugh. The plain fact was that this girl spoke the truth, there was no evil in her at all. He felt rebuked, almost chastened, by stark honesty.

There was suddenly a silence in the room. Even the children had cleared out of the scullery and were shouting distantly in the garden. Mary was back at the stove, and the other two were looking at him, Morag with her hands folded in front of her, Kirsty sniffing. The expectancy in their manner nudged him. Tea was down, the disaster accepted as fact, and now was the moment for consolation.

He was the praying Minister, ready to tug the Almighty's sleeve on the slightest provocation. Only he couldn't do it now. He couldn't offer what they wanted, no challenge to themselves, but direct intervention on behalf of Tammy in the hands of the police. 'Take it to the Lord in Prayer' indeed, but not this!

He looked straight at Kirsty Wood.

'Tammy will get off on probation this time,' he said. 'But not the next. It's up to you to see that there is no next time, isn't it? And me, too, I know that, if Tammy will listen to me, which I doubt.'

'Minister!' the mother was outraged. 'What are you sayin'? Do you mean my laddie's a bad yin?'

'He's on the road,' John said, with a kind of anger.

'Oh, my goodness! I never thought to hear this from a minister under ma roof!'

Mary turned.

'Ma, it's true!'

'You! You can stand there and talk about ma Tammy? You what's. . . I couldn't say it in front of the Minister, that's what I couldn't. You've brought grief on ma old head!'

'Och, come off it, Ma. Ye ken fine I was on the way afore you was married.'

'There's no need for any of this,' John said, and he stood. 'I don't see how I can help you. Just now at any rate.'

Kirsty heaved herself up.

'Are we no getting any consolation, then?'

'Not from me.'

'This is a fine thing. Ma Gawd, ye get the Minister and he's nothing to say. And he won't dae nothing neither. Do you wonder folk don't darken the door o' your kirk?'

'You certainly haven't darkened it for twenty years.'

'Throwin' that in ma teeth, are you?'

'Take it that way if you want, Mrs. Wood.'

'I ken fine what it is. We're not good enough for you. You've plenty o' time, though, to visit that hoor o' Babylon that's just back frae London.'

'Shut up!' John said.

She stared at him, Then she began to weep, turning away. Morag was astounded. She made a gesture towards Kirsty, as though to support her, but thought better of it.

'I'm sorry,' John said. 'I shouldn't have spoken like that. You must forgive me, Mrs. Wood. I'll do what I can for Tammy. I'll go down to the police station now.'

Kirsty made gulping noises.

'I don't set much store by what you can do, or the likes of you. It's nae wonder what's happening in this toon. Wi' that woman wandering aboot the place. She shot a man dead in her hoose in London and she's free to come back here. Do you wonder that ma Tammy disnae have much respect for the law?'

He went out on Kirsty's last wailing cry, but at the front door Mary caught his arm.

'You mustn't mind. Ma's like that. She's aye been like that, the world agin her.'

'And you, Mary? It's not against you?'

'Oh, no. I couldn't say that, could I? Don't you worry about Tammy. He'll get what he's meant for.'

That haunted John in the road, Tammy getting what he was meant for, the sense of a boy of eighteen having gone so far along one way there wasn't much chance of turning. One family had

produced them both, Mary and he, one great heaving slut of a woman.

His anger cut him off, put him outside the thing he was trying to be, leaving him just a raging man walking fast towards the High Street. And then, as he reached the Town Hall, he remembered that he still hadn't fixed a date for the christening of Mary's new baby.

Elsie had put off her first shopping in the town until the late afternoon, when there wouldn't be so many people about. She had to go out, though, there was no bread or tea or eggs. She had to face doing a complete round with her basket and she put on the coat she had travelled in and the hat, too, with the kind of faint, silly hope that it might serve as a disguise. She had the certain knowledge that beyond the door with the knocker eyes waited, even though the narrow street was empty.

Dr. Hill had visited in the morning, brisk, efficient, noticing her with a professional detachment and a timed smile. He had gone fast up the stairs and as quickly down them.

'No real change,' he said, looking at the fire in the range. 'Can't expect it, of course. You'll let me know at once if there's anything?'

His car had snorted away. There had been no one else, no nurse, no sign of Morag or the Minister.

Everything was done that had to be done, the fire banked up as though for an outing, when with luck she wouldn't be gone more than half an hour. She had achieved something in this house already, not belonging to it, but fitting in, with a routine, and last night there had been television, a long play about people dying for things they believed in. She had watched it, feeling distant and uneasy. She had sat on watching, even through the prayers, where a popular clergyman had seemed to suggest that religion was all rather jolly, but you had to take it seriously, too. There had been some sacred music provided by voices that had never known sin.

There was the television again tonight, when she got back. These days you didn't have to sit in a silence at all, it was something.

She picked up the basket and went down the hall. There was no one in the street, nothing moved, it was rather warm still, the sun still high. She walked along it, making a shadow which went ahead of her and passed over a cat licking its paws. Then a message boy on a

bike swung in from the High Street, accepting her hat and coat, scarcely looking at her.

'Fine day,' he called out.

It startled her, she almost looked after him. She walked quickly, to reach the High Street and turn into it, to get that over.

It was the bus time, she had forgotten about that, there were thirty people there waiting at the end of their day, tired-looking, some of them almost angry. A man with a newspaper lifted his head and stared. Then a woman was doing it, then a girl beside her. The woman turned to another, whispering something. Eyes came round, pairs of eyes, one after the other.

Some of the faces she knew, and they knew her. But there was no sign of that on them; they were staring, expressionless, a little winded, caught in something that could only be savoured afterwards.

She didn't try a smile, she wasn't a fool. The butcher's was just behind them and she went in. It was the old man she remembered, old Thomson, who sold good meat and charged for it. He was portly, just at the end of his day, ready to close down, his sparse grey hair even touched with the blood that was on his hands and his white overall. He held a cleaver, as though for something to do, though the shop was quite empty.

'Mince,' Elsie said. 'A pound of mince. Your best.'

He looked at her. You could see it click in his mind, a slow man except when it came to selling meat. It was in his eyes then. His mouth moved. He turned away and went out to the back, leaving her alone in the shop.

But she wasn't quite alone in it. The people at the bus stop had turned and were peering in, talking amongst themselves now, their faces alive again. She was betrayed by a bright angle of sunlight and they could see her, past the hanging carcases and the spiked chickens with long dangling necks.

Thomson came back carrying the mince in one big hand. He slapped it on the scales and stood glaring at them, his breathing a kind of snuffle.

Elsie gave Thomson a pound note. He wrapped up the mince and turned to the cash register. The bus came in while he was there, and people moved towards it, but some of them still looking back, tongues still going.

Elsie had her hand out for the change, but the silver rattled on the

counter. Thomson turned away, whistling to himself. He picked up the cleaver again and drove it into a chopping-board, hard. He had a lot of strength for his years; it was still with him.

The bus pulled out as Elsie opened the butcher's door, flat full faces lining the windows, every one turned.

The High Street was broad here and she had to wait for two cars. As she got to the grocer's a woman came out, remembered as an old friend of her father's, grey hair straggling out from under a felt hat. Her eyesight wasn't very good.

'It's no a bad day, lassie.'

'No. No, it's not.'

'Who are you? Ella Mackie, isn't it?'

'No . . . I . . . Excuse me.'

It was dark in the grocer's, the north side of the street, and it was Mrs. Prain on duty, tall, but with the pear-shaped figure which suggested a long history of nibbling at her wares. She was standing, one hand holding the other, talking to a customer, a young woman Elsie didn't know, with a child. Her voice fitted ill the instrument that produced it, thin and without reserves.

' . . . so I says, if you think you can get away with that you've got another guess coming and I . . .'

There was silence. The girl turned, surprised, looking at Elsie, while the child tugged at her hand and whimpered, like a puppy.

Something had happened to Mrs. Prain's mouth, it was compressed, and scarcely relaxed at all for the one word.

'Yes?'

'I want tea and butter. Eggs if you have them. Farm eggs. A dozen. A bag of flour and margarine, a pound. And . . '

Mrs. Prain heaved herself away from the counter, towards the back shop. The girl, still looking at Elsie, left, towing her child. The door shut and the bell on it clanged. Elsie put her basket on the counter and waited.

Mrs. Prain brought everything Elsie asked for without a word, and the basket began to fill. The only sound was the heavy woman's step in the shop and somewhere, behind, a young girl singing a pop song.

Elsie knew now that she could stand it, just as she could stand doing for the old man the things the nurse had taught her. Only part of you was there, a minimum necessary for the transaction. In time,

when you got the trick, you could be almost free, and you would only become yourself again behind a closed door and in an empty room.

She thanked Mrs. Prain for the change of another pound and this time she got it in her hand, one and ninepence. She picked up the basket and smiled, straight into the woman's astonished face.

7

JOCK sat beside his father in the Bentley, not any longer looking at the old man. It seemed to make him nervous to be looked at, odd in someone who had always made quite a thing of returning a stare with a stare. They had talked about nothing but prefabricated houses over lunch in Edinburgh and again on the road north.

Jock had stayed in London for two days, not able to get an air seat to Scotland until this Sunday morning. Trains irritated him, besides there had been things to do in the south. Now he wondered if the delay had been a mistake, making the old man peevish.

He was very sensitive to temperatures in his dealings with people; these affected you directly, often soon, and it was something to be alert about. His father's withdrawal disturbed him, not something he had expected at all, and certainly the last thing he wanted at this stage.

He hadn't offered to drive the Bentley, the car was sacred to his father's hand. The old man drove it as though he carried only third-party insurance on a ton's worth of mobile platinum. It was extremely boring to sit beside Will Innis in a Bentley, you could hear the clock tick all right.

'In America they have television sets in the back now,' Jock said.
The chewed cigar wagged.

'We were first with that. Rolls Royce. Thought you'd know.'

'Haven't put one in for your guests, Father?'

'Lot of damn' nonsense.'

Silence for the clock.

'All right I'm a sinner,' Jock said. 'Why?'

'Eh? What are you talking about?'

'I'm the prodigal home, Father. And you bought me a damn' bad lunch.'

'Same as I always get there. Hope you haven't got any of these American fads about food?'

Jock laughed.

'Let's get it over. We're getting near Kildrummy. I want to know where I stand. Is it that London business, still? Elsie Garr?'

'I'd rather you didn't mention her name.'

'As bad as that? It's six months ago. I did what you told me and went to America.'

'Aye. So you did.'

'I thought we'd been lucky. There wasn't anything in the papers. Or was there?'

'No. We were lucky.'

'Father, I'm sorry about that. I said I was sorry at the time. I was sorry for Elsie, too. But I didn't come into it at all. I didn't even know the bloke who was shot. Never heard of him. Never seen him.'

'Aye. But you knew her.'

'So what? It could have been any girl, couldn't it?'

'What do you mean by that?'

'I mean that I've always had a woman around somewhere, and I've never made any bones about it.'

'Aye, Jock. You're right there, you've never made any bones about it.'

Jock was angry then. He turned to the old man.

'You sound like holy Willie!'

'Don't you speak to your father like that!'

Silence again, the speedometer needle creeping up from thirty-seven miles per hour to forty-one. The fields and the houses ambled past and there seemed to be a kind of sealed vacuum outside the car, too, as well as within it, the moving traffic scarcely real. Jock thought of Susie not liking him and now this; it worried him. The old man and he had always understood each other, at any rate Jock had worked to create this illusion.

'Shall I take the cigar, Father? It can't be digestible.'

Will Innis put the mangled stub into a tray and snapped it shut.

'All right, Jock, I will get it off my mind. Did you bring Elsie Garr back to Kildrudderie?'

'Did I . . . what?'

The old man risked turning his head, as though searching for something. Then his face cleared.

'Och, I knew it all along. It's your mother. She thought you were behind it. Elsie's here. She's back in the town. Looking after her father supposedly, though he's as good as dead.'

'You mean . . . you all thought I'd set her up in Kildrudderie. Under your noses? To be ready for me?'

'Aye. It was a woman's notion. You never know where you are with them and their ideas. I'm sorry, Jock.'

But Jock was laughing, hugging himself.

'I must have a wonderful reputation for nerve.'

'It's still not a thing to joke about son. I can tell you I've been losing sleep on this. It seemed to me possible, mind you, at one time. After listening to your mother, that is.'

All the signs of laughter were gone. Jock's face was suddenly set.

'Who else thinks I'm behind this?' he asked. 'Is it being talked about?'

'Oh, no, I don't think so. Mind you, you can never tell what's being talked about in the town. She's here and you're here now. And they all know. You realize that?'

'Yes, Father, they all know. All my life everyone has known in Kilrudderic. It's something you miss when you're away from it. In a place like New York. You haven't got an audience any more. And after all I was born to a star part.'

'I'm glad you realize that, my boy. Jock, I'm going to ask you something now. You're not to be angry. I want your promise. That you'll never look near that girl in Kilrudderie.'

'How could I? In the middle of a stage with everyone watching? Some things would be a bit too much for me, even with my nerve.'

'You're sure of that?'

'Quite sure of it, Father. And I apologize for the holy Willie.'

'Aye, it doesn't fit me well, I know. I was like you for long enough.' Jock grinned.

'The rumours reached me. Has it been a drain on our family finances?'

'None of your cheek,' the old man said, but he sounded himself again.

Jock lit a cigarette.

'Father, let's play it wild. See if you can get fifty out of this piece of plated upholstery.'

Suddenly Will Innis laughed.

'That's that,' Jock thought.

His mother wouldn't be such an easy proposition. All he had to be sure of was her neutrality and when he could count on that he would go ahead. But very easily at first. It wouldn't do to forget that old

Will Innis still kept his fingers on the purse, and watched the six-pences, very carefully.

Sheina, in her teens, had been a disappointment to her mother, a feeling carefully concealed from the girl, but admitted by Eliza. It was as though she refused to grow out of adolescence, the gaucheness hanging on, with a kind of defence of childishness to which she reverted with irritating frequency. Sheina could have been, so easily, her daddy's girl, if encouraged, but fortunately Will was a dynast, he believed in the family as an institution for keeping money under one name and in this the female side was no use whatsoever. He had watched his small daughter's pretty little ways with tolerance, and her less pretty ways later on with something bounding on chronic irritation. He didn't understand women, wives, daughters, or secretaries, and he saw no real reason why he should attempt to do so.

Eliza knew that her rating as a wife was satisfactory. She had entered the dynasty in its second generation and played a moderate part towards securing the third. A second son would have been better than a girl, certainly, but Jock was healthy and sharp and keen on prefabrication, and a man couldn't demand too much of this life without overstepping his luck.

Eliza, working a tapestry chair cover on a round frame, smiled to herself.

Her own struggle had been a different one, it in a way ran parallel to Will's for more money, but her objective had been more security in herself. She had fought all her life, not for social position as Will accused her of doing, but for an acceptable personality, something jellied in a mould with a design that pleased her. She had tried many moulds and cracked them all in the end, destroying what had been formed. The tortured progress of her voice was a surface symptom of this process, of her compulsion to change, reshaping what was unsatisfactory.

There is a histrionic flare in the Scot which can make him a flamboyant failure, stagier even than the Irish, and Lizzie Bain's father had been one of these, the son of a solid farmer with a jinx on him from the cradle. When he had money he lost it, but never prosaically, always in a manner which seemed to come near to the vastly comic, except for his family.

Lizzie had married the dynast for one kind of security and set out

to make the other for herself. She wanted to be whole in her own eyes, not a makeshift, and though she had never achieved this she felt she was nearer to it. She could dress now, her voice didn't make the 'county' wince as much as it once had done, she had interests that were real and almost enough to fill her days. And increasingly, over the years, her ambition for Sheina had been the very simple and normal one of wanting her child to avoid her mistakes, to become adult whole, knowing where she was going, and not faltering.

And then for far too long Sheina hadn't seemed to want to become adult at all. At eighteen she was still the leggy schoolgirl, with an indifferent complexion, and a tendency to fall over chairs. This was painful to Eliza, sharply so, because she felt in some way that she had already been through all this for her child, and had made the payment that should have secured Sheina's immunity to this stumbling about in life.

Jock was a clear illustration to his mother that this could happen, the parent could make a payment in living which projected the child on ahead. Jock was on ahead, she knew this instinctively, certain that he was so far ahead of Will that her husband would be positively unnerved if he could really see into his son's mind. The boy had never wasted anything in the whole of his life, he had only touched what he could use, and moved with calculation from one secured position to another.

She hadn't suckled him, hadn't been able to, and she wondered sometimes if in this small seeming neglect of a new life lay the foundations of the wall that had always seemed to be between them. He had needed nurses to assist him growing up, and parents no doubt to provide for the nurses, but as early as five he had possessed his own soul with an unnerving kind of calmness. Sometimes looking at her son Eliza wondered what experience of feeling he had, if any.

He was extremely highly sexed. There had been symptoms of that early enough, too. At seventeen a maid at his public school had been forced to leave and so had Jock, after the investigation. Eliza had felt in Will a tremendous tolerance towards his son on this point which made her wonder a little just how consistently her husband had been unfaithful to her. It would be highly organized, not casual, for Will organized everything about himself.

There might well be the bastards of the housing baron down in the

town, and at times Eliza had caught herself keeping an eye open for likenesses.

For a long time she had fought the feeling of her son as a kind of adversary, and then she had to give up that fight because she knew he was. Jock was out to control his father and she was a slight hindrance here. While Will lived there was a queen on the board, too, but of course she wouldn't survive for long when the king went.

For a mother there was only one channel left for love, Sheina, but it was feeling she kept under control, under the discipline of her hopes for her daughter.

Now, working on her embroidery, in that drawing-room which was expensively gracious and, she knew, derided by people like Hester Fairway-Campbell, Eliza had made a kind of peace with herself at long last.

Sheina, the gawky one, had turned into a girl of twenty-one in love. She sat in the window-seat of the big bay with her knees up, and her long neck bent forward a little, as she read a book held a shade too close, for she was near-sighted and since becoming engaged to Colin had refused to wear glasses. She would never be beautiful, but she didn't need to be, she could look up with a smile that caught at Eliza's heart, even if the smile was for Colin.

'Mummy ?'

'Yes, dear ?' The embroidery needle went in and out.

'Aren't we terribly peaceful ? It's so peaceful that you feel there's going to be an explosion.'

Eliza stiffened.

'That's absurd.'

Sheina yawned. Her black hair cut short, fell back. Her nose, though short, was a little too wide, and so was her mouth, but anyone seeing her now would look again. They would look, too, to see her walk, with a curious lithe eagerness. Eliza knew she had never at any time walked like that, even after the dancing school in Perth.

'Maybe it's Jock coming home that makes me feel like this. Jock always makes things happen, doesn't he ? It's funny how I've always adored him and he's not a bit like Colin. They don't like each other at all, you know.'

'What makes you say that ?'

'What Colin doesn't say. There is a reserved silence on Jock.'

Sheina giggled. 'Of course he was never in the Black Watch. You can't really trust a man who hasn't been.'

Eliza laughed. She was suddenly enjoying this.

'Sheina, really.'

The girl got up and came over, walking a little like a Siamese cat in the sun, walking because it's a pleasure not because she has to. She stood by her mother a moment and then took a turn down the long room. She held her hands on her elbows looking at herself in a vast mirror.

'It's perfectly true about Colin. He's absurd. I haven't an illusion about the man I'm marrying. I very much doubt if I'm making a sound choice.'

'And why do you say that?'

'It's rather silly to marry the Army these days. One should marry business. Colin will never even have a battle. He'll spend his life a soldier who won't have had his baptism of fire and all that. He won't be tested because if it comes to it we'll all be blown up with him. You see what I mean? A business man now, is something for our age. Like Jock. It's another kind of war and you die of heart failure.'

'You're being very sharp, Sheina. What have you been reading?'

'Jane Austen. That's what's making me think about my future. Those girls always did so carefully. You made perfectly sure that your husband had a large house, and an income which ran to orangeries and a really handsome carriage. Love walks so agreeably hand in hand with these. But with Colin it may very well be chickens in the end. How much money will Daddy settle on me?'

'I should think not a penny at the moment. You'll inherit. Probably from some sort of liferent for me, and I'll live for ever.'

Sheina came over, suddenly, and sank down by her mother's straight chair, putting her arms around Eliza's legs.

'I want you to. I honestly want you to live for ever. Though I'll be a little sour sometimes when I have to feed the hens and come to see you in your splendid expensive house. I say, we're burying Daddy. He wouldn't like that at all, would he?'

'No, dear, he wouldn't. Your father could never visualize his own funeral.'

Sheina looked up.

'Mummy, did you love him? The way I love Colin? The same kind of idiocy?'

Eliza drew in her breath. There was no time to prevaricate.

'I wouldn't say the same kind, Sheina.'

For a moment their eyes met and held. Then the girl put her dark head sideways on her mother's knee.

'You approve of Colin and me, don't you, Mummy?'

'Yes, dear, I do. Very much.'

'I'm glad. But you don't like Colin's mother?'

'Now you're being ridiculous!'

But she wasn't of course. Eliza could have attempted an explanation, but it wouldn't have been easy. To her Hester Fairway-Campbell had been given life on a platter, not money, but everything else. She was one of those women who give the impression of having walked into a world in which she found most things pretty satisfactory if not quite up to her standards. She looked at the strugglers without comprehension and very little interest.

What a lot of nonsense all the talk about the breakdown of British social barriers was. Eliza knew this from an experience of determined climbing which was more for Sheina than for herself. If the barriers hadn't still existed, if there wasn't a world a little apart that was worth trying to enter for a great many reasons, Eliza's own living would have been much simpler. But that world existed all right, stripped of its trappings by two wars, but not its essential unity and coherence, a minority out to look after its own interests. You could be born into it or marry into it, but entrance any other way wasn't easy. Certainly it wasn't to be bought, for money amongst Burke's Distinguished Families was, if possessed, played down. You didn't go in for drawing-rooms with gesso lamp fittings and a seven-thousand-pound Bentley.

Eliza wanted this world for Sheina. She would step into it when she married Colin and would fit in, too, at once, her training towards this end had been careful and topped off . . . not by an expensive finishing in Switzerland . . . but with a couple of terms at what was really a riding-school run under the licence of her creditors by a bankrupt Scottish Countess.

Eliza had known what she was about. It was inevitable after the planning which had gone into all this, and Sheina's début at the Perth Hunt Ball, that the girl would fall in love with a Colin and marry him. Sheina was now in a pattern as her mother never had been, and it warmed Eliza to know this.

'What kind of a girl is Jock going to marry?' Sheina asked suddenly.
'I should imagine the daughter of a Clydeside millionaire.'

Sheina looked startled.

'Mother! What on earth? You sound as if Jock had it all thought out.'

'I don't suppose he has yet. But when he comes to marry he'll do it using his head.'

Sheina was on her feet again, moving with her arms clasped in front of her, hands holding her elbows.

'You mean in a way I'm not?'

Eliza couldn't tell her daughter that she was marrying well because her mother had used her head. She smiled.

'I think you want happiness, darling. Jock wants power from money. They're two different things, though I'm not so silly as to think it makes you miserable to be rich. It doesn't.'

Sheina sat down, suddenly.

'Mummy, I've noticed this for years. The way you are with Jock. You and I . . . well I know what we feel. Why couldn't it have been that way with you and Jock?'

'I don't know,' Eliza said, honestly. And she said it with a kind of bitterness, but that only stayed for a minute, to be followed by a sense of loss, that she had borne a son who never really had been that at all.

She heard a crunch of tyres on gravel then and rose.

'There's the car, Sheina. We'd better go and meet them.'

Once Sheina would have run off, down the stairs from the drawing-room to her brother, but now she stayed, going almost sedately by Eliza's side, the two of them together. It seemed to Eliza then that all her carefully paid premiums of planning were beginning to pay off. She was going to be given her reflected happiness.

Hester was doing flowers in the drawing-room, great sprays of lilac with late tulips. A cigarette was burning down on her lips and she had her eyes narrowed a little to keep the smoke out of them.

Hamish came in wearing one of his bow-ties. He sprang these on her occasionally as though to demonstrate that he could still surprise her. She took out the cigarette and threw it into the wood-burning fire.

'Not with that suit, darling!'

'I'm feeling jaunty,' Hamish said.

'How you can with the prospect ahead of us I don't know. And why are you dressed so soon?"

'I thought one of us better be. You know old Will. As soon as he hears they're coming here for drinks he'll look at his watch and say: "Well, come on, let's get it over."'

'I wish it were over. Hamish, are we going to have to go in for a lot of this once the holy bonds are tied and what not? I mean by that, does Sheina marrying Colin automatically hitch us on to a kind of relation with her people which has to be worked on? It's the only thing, quite honestly, which gives me cold feet about this marriage at all. You know what I feel about Lizzie.'

'For heaven's sake, if you call her that in private it'll pop out at a party.'

'And we shall be undone? I think of her as Lizzie. Where's Colin?'

'Having a bath, from the sounds.'

'Oh, Lord, I didn't build up the boiler. Why can't he have his baths with the regiment? There was just enough for me. Did you bring that extra bottle of gin from town?'

'No.'

'Hamish, why not?'

'I decided we couldn't afford it, really. I'm going to be firm about these things in future. There's enough for two lots of weak ones, and that'll have to do. Old Will takes whisky, though he won't like mine.'

'I suppose you want me to buy the gin out of house-keeping?'

'No. It would give you too good an excuse to serve sausages another day a week. I'll buy it, but I'll watch it, too. You go and dress. And cheer up old girl.'

'I don't know why you're so sprightly.'

'I like parties. Even bad ones. We don't go to them enough.'

'And why don't we go to them enough? Because we can't afford to repay too much hospitality. One big one a year which lets us go to everyone else's big one and that's that. Do you know we haven't been out to dinner anywhere for six months? You made me say no to the Colsons.'

'Can't stand the man. All his shares go up. And he will tell me about it over port. Hurry woman, or they'll all be on us while your hair is impossible.'

When she had gone Hamish threw a couple of logs on the fire. Then he straightened and looked around the room, wiping his fingers

on the seat of his trousers. He walked over to the drinks table, picked up the gin bottle, held it to the light, then took the top off. Very carefully he added water from a jug, about half an inch of it. He did the same with the vermouth.

'Father,' Colin said from the doorway. 'What are you doing with that water?'

Hamish turned, smiling.

'Preparing for the multitude, my boy. Here you see the military type at the logical end of his career . . . if he doesn't get shot. It's better for the liver, too.'

'I thought it was the sort of thing the butler did.'

'Precisely. I've taken over his duties. Have a salt biscuit. But hold your thirst for a time.'

Colin was immaculately suited, with no hint of sartorial flippancy. He was of medium height, rather broad-shouldered, with straight, fair hair that was long and draped back. He had a slight moustache which hadn't yet learned to bristle, and good teeth when he smiled.

'I don't like all these shifts we're put to these days,' he said, pulling out a case and lighting a cigarette.

'Who does, my boy? But we might as well be cheerful about them. I manage to say that at least once a week and to achieve the cheer, too. This happens to be one of the days. Though heaven knows I've no reason for it. You know that oil I bought last autumn? The damn' thing's gone down ever since. Everyone else's oil is roaring away, but not mine, blast it.'

Colin frowned.

'I've always said you needed a decent broker.'

'I should think a decent broker would blich away from me. The mark of disaster on my brow or something. Oh, hell, let's have a drink. The whisky's unpolluted.'

The two men stood together by the fire with glasses. Hamish said:

'It'll be interesting to see what America's done to Jock, eh?'

'You mean he might be wearing a tie that lights up?'

'A bit harsh, Colin.'

'I always think Jock comes into a room like an auctioneer. His eye runs round it pricing everything, including the people.'

Hamish looked at his son. Colin had a sharp streak, something from his mother, and to be expected. It was useful in the Army, too.

Colin might get his battalion yet, even in peace-time, with its sluggish promotion. Hamish knew perfectly well that it had needed wars to jog him on. Wars and the right deaths at the right time. Funny to think of an Army career without the timely deaths.

Jock held in his hand what Colonel Fairway-Campbell had with a kind of bare-faced impudence called a martini. The company seemed nicely organized in pairs without him, Sheina with Colin, his mother with the Colonel and his father with his hand on Hester Fairway-Campbell's arm and she looking as though she was prepared to go on tolerating that just this once more.

Jock stood with his elbow on the Adams chimney-piece, conscious that in a moment or two Hester was going to move towards him and the attack. Waiting didn't make him in the least nervous. He felt, in this drawing-room, only a kind of impatience, as though time spent here was completely wasted. The Fairway-Campbells just didn't matter any more, whatever his mother might think about that; they were a kind of social leftover, to be by-passed by the intelligent. In some ways his mother was a fool; she must be, to waste time battering down the doors to rooms like these. What the hell was there when you got in them except weak drinks and that invariable sense of not enough money to meet the overheads?

He sipped his drink. An American would pour it into the flowers. An American wouldn't begin to understand what all this was about in the social scheme and he'd be quite right not to bother. This was the fag end of feudalism, stripped of power and money, and putting up a pretence about position and family. Most of these so-called landowners would sell up like a shot if they could get the welfare state interested in their sprawling houses for an open Borstal. The Colonel, in order to pay for his hen houses, had been forced to sell two-thirds of his trees and now Rosemount, a lumpish, Scottish Georgian building, sat on its hill denuded of foliage, rather like a half-plucked chicken.

Jock looked at Colin and his sister. They stood together, holding glasses, and looking into each other's eyes. Sheina was almost as tall as Colin. The height had gone to the female side with the Innises, but thank God not much else. Sheina had now the kind of bright dumbness to which she had been carefully trained and she'd probably use any money she got from her father to bolster up this mausoleum.

Jock almost smiled then. He wondered how much Sheina was counting on, and the Fairway-Campbells were counting on. The way he was planning things Will Innis mightn't leave quite as plump a personal fortune as the family seemed to expect. It was a waste these days, with death duties, to have much family money. Much better to keep most of it tied up in the business. His father might take a bit of persuading on this point, but he'd come round. Jock was sure he could bring him round.

Hester made her move, deserting Will, approaching the fireplace with a smile fixed on her face. Hester was tall, and Jock straightened not to have to look up to her.

'Well, Jock, how does it feel to be back in the old country?'

'I scarcely know yet. But there's going to be a lot of work for me to do. I like that.'

He had the feeling that Colin, not looking, was none the less listening.

'And did you like America?' Hester asked.

'Very much.'

'Oh. How, particularly?'

'Well, perhaps most as a business man. They don't waste time, they cut through to the essentials and get on with it. Though I wasn't over there doing business, I was a sort of learner. You know, studying production methods.'

'And are they so much more efficient than we are?'

Jock nodded.

'I think on the whole, yes. Though there are cracks.'

Hester kept on smiling, as though in her childhood she had been taught that business was a little vulgar and one left it to rather odd types one normally tried to avoid meeting.

'You think you might go back, Jock?'

'Oh, certainly. I hope to go very often.'

And then, perhaps because Hester disliked him, and possibly because his mother was watching, Jock set out to charm. He knew that his best asset was his smile, very white in a dark face. He used it. He began to talk about America, lightly of experiences there, rather as might a British tourist in the bar of the *Queen Elizabeth* on the way back. It was the kind of thing which usually went down well and it drew to Jock now his audience, all of them in the room, even including Colin, those pale blue eyes focused steadily. He got them

laughing, too, the ritual between two families suddenly almost a party. Jock saw his mother's face relaxed, her look approving. It wasn't a look he had sought much or had often, but he was pleased to get it now.

The Innis family didn't make a move to go until at least half an hour later than might have been expected. By the time they did the gin bottle was empty and the vermouth two-thirds down. Sheina was somehow staging the evacuation, and she contrived this neatly, in a manner which left Jock and Colin still inside the drawing-room while the others were already in the hall.

'Could I have a word with you?' Colin said sharply.

'Of course.'

'It's about the wedding, actually . . . I . . . The thing is, I wondered if you'd be my best man?'

Jock smiled. He could see how Colin was hating this.

'Isn't that rather unusual? A best man from the bride's side? I should have thought a brother officer of your regiment?'

'Well, yes, in a way. But Sheina . . . I mean Sheina and I thought it would be rather nice to sort of keep it in the family. That is, if you're agreeable, of course.'

'I am, if you want it. And honoured. I've never carried the ring for anyone.'

Colin put on a smile.

'Oh, well, this will be an experience for you then. Can we consider that fixed up?'

'Absolutely.'

'You won't mind helping us get on with things a bit, will you?'

'I'll take it all very seriously,' Jock said, and got a quick look from those pale eyes.

In the Bentley Will and Eliza sat in the front, Jock with his sister. She patted his arm.

'Aren't you the splendid social asset, Jock? Did you acquire all that charm in America?'

He grinned at her.

'Yes, I went to a school for it in Chicago. Six weeks and you're never at a loss, even in a British drawing-room.'

Sheina giggled.

'And you are going to be best man?'

'I am, yes. Why did you want that? Someone in a kilt from the regiment would have looked better.'

'I wanted you.'

She squeezed his arm. She had grown into an adult quite suddenly, but if she had any ideas of taking him with her where she was going, little sister would have to think again. He smiled at her.

'It's going to be a big wedding?'

'Enormous. I didn't come out properly, so this is going to be it. It's costing Daddy about a thousand. But don't talk about it. It's not good for him.'

'Pisky, or Church of Scotland?' he asked.

'Ah,' Sheina said, lowering her voice. 'There have been ructions about that. Daddy's winning so far.'

'Meaning Church of Scotland?'

'Yes. Daddy says that's where we belong and that's where we're having it if he's paying for it. I don't really mind. It isn't as if the Kilrudderie Parish Church was dreary like most of them. After all, it used to be Papist, and it's got that feel still. We can make it madly pretty. And there's just a chance that we'll get the Pisky Choir. That would make everything quite perfect.'

'What will the Reverend John say to the Pisky choir?'

'Oh, I don't think he's a bit stuffy, do you? He won't even mind a bit of pomp. I think he'll probably quite like it. Makes a change. Of course we'll have to get another organist, we simply can't have Mrs. Paton making the thing sound like a squeeze-box. I thought we might get over that by having a professional from Perth.'

'Three months,' Jock said. 'Are you nervous?'

Sheina laughed.

'All of a tremble.' And then her voice changed. 'Oh, Jock, try to get on with Colin, please! I know he's Army and you haven't much time for that. But . . . I'm potty about him. And if you think Mummy . . .'

'Ssh,' Jock said.

'The partition's half up, they can't hear. This hasn't been staged, Jock, that's what I'm trying to say. Colin and I . . . well, we're in love.'

'Okay, I'm not running any interference. You be happy, Sheina. You get what you want.'

'Is that what you're doing?' she asked.

He knew she was looking at him, but he didn't turn his head, only laughed.

'Did you have a girl in America, Jock?'

'No.'

'Not even in the way that . . . ?'

He did look at her then.

'The way . . . what?'

'I was . . . thinking of Elsie Garr.'

'And what the hell do you know about her?'

'Oh, Jock, come off it, please. Oh, I know, I'm not supposed to have heard a thing. Did you really believe that could happen in a place like this? I know all about it. And that she's back here.'

'Do you? I didn't bring her back here. And if that's why you've tied me up for the wedding, don't worry. I won't be seeing her.'

'Now you're way off. You don't have to be with me, Jock. I'm not such a little girl that I can't understand quite a lot. And you seem to forget I'm in love. I know what it is to have a man's hands on you, and want them there.'

Suddenly he knew the kind of feeling which had made him, as a boy, step over the years between them into moments of companionship which, if they hadn't lasted long, had been real enough. He took her hand and squeezed it.

'I'll be a model best man,' he said. 'But you didn't need to plot it all out so carefully.'

Jock had spent an interesting morning in the glass-walled office that was directly above his father's. Interesting, but not exactly reassuring. He had declined Will's invitation to lunch in Perth, getting a sandwich and a glass of milk from the canteen and looking up to see the Bentley go whispering out of the gates. Lunching in Perth hadn't been part of the old routine at Scotsroofs at all.

The old man was clipping, that was the plain truth of it. He had reached that point where he was willing to let things roll along, and Scotsroofs was coasting on old orders, nothing new of any appreciable size had come in since the Coventry job was finished. The order books only looked healthy until you considered them with an eye to a year from now. The project for a factory extension was still on paper, as was the new compact house which had been on the boards when Jock left.

'I'm twenty-nine,' Jock thought, 'and all this is in my lap, even if the old man won't see it that way.'

At two-thirty the Bentley came back. Jock watched it park and lit a cigarette. He got up and walked around the office, taut, knowing what he had to do and knowing, too, that it was no use putting off the showdown. The old man might just be a shade mellow from a couple of whiskies and a lager, his reactions a hint dulled by a three-course meal. It was a good time.

The stairs were covered in a rubberized plastic that deadened footfalls, and so were the halls beyond them. The only real sound was the clacking of typewriters until from the secretaries pool he heard a little flurry of high-pitched laughter. He went to that door and opened it, and just stood looking in.

One of the girls was at her machine, the other two were nowhere near theirs. One had been modelling a new hat.

'Charming,' Jock said, his voice chill. 'But another time, if you don't mind. Five-fifteen, perhaps?'

The model closed her mouth so sharply that her teeth gave a little click. She snatched off the hat and went to her table.

He closed the door as gently as he had opened it and went to his father's outer office. Alice looked slightly more of a slut than usual, wearing her hair now in a bouffant style with some kind of padding under it. Her lipstick was an orange pink and she had nails to match. Seeing him she made a kind of effort to pull an overfed body into a mildly disciplined shape.

'Oh, Mr. Innis!'

'Is my father busy?'

'Well, I don't know. . . .'

She knew all right. There was a hint of a smile on her lips for a moment, and then she took it off. Jock walked past her, knocked once, but didn't wait.

His father was sitting behind his desk, smoking a cigar. The room, with an electric bar glowing now the central heating was off, was very warm.

'Oh, Jock. Had a busy morning, eh? Catching up?'

'Yes, catching up, Father. Mind if we have a talk now? It may take a little time.'

'Well . . . I think I can manage it.'

There was more than a hint of the defensive in the old man's

manner, as though he had been caught out and knew it. Was it possible that he knew, too, he was losing his grip around this factory?

Jock sat down.

'You didn't want to talk last night, Father. But I want you to know now that I've come back from America with something absolutely revolutionary in my mind. It's something that may seem to you . . . if it's put into effect . . . likely to throw this whole business out of gear for a bit. And I don't deny that. It will. It's, on the face of it, a gamble, even a wild one. But for the last four months I was in the States I had it in my mind all the time, and I think it's a gamble that will come off. In fact I'm damn' certain that nothing can stop it coming off.'

Will Innis was straight in his chair now. For half an hour he let Jock talk, not putting in a word, as though he was too winded to say a thing. Then he exploded.

'Have you taken leave of your senses, boy? Are you sitting there calmly suggesting that Scotsroofs should try to break into the American markets?'

'I am, Father.'

'You're crazy. We couldn't do it on our capital. We'd be up against the combines at once. They'd blast us off the map.'

'Yes, I thought you'd say that. In most parts they would. But I've found a crack. I've found a way in. We can prefabricate houses in Scotland which can be shipped direct to the Mid-West by the new Great Lakes Canal, and when we've paid all costs we'll sell those houses on the American market for seven hundred dollars less than the nearest competitor. And a much better house for the money. Father, I've been in to this in complete detail, every aspect of costs. The only American materials we need use are the concrete foundations. And my figure includes estimates for them. There's a market out there that will gobble up these houses.'

'But American protection, Jock!'

'It doesn't exist in this field. Not yet. And we're not drawing attention to ourselves, remember. I've got preliminary arrangements for a front company, in a little town on Lake Michigan. It'll change its name, to the Scottish American Prefabrications. Scotam for short. We'll work through them, establishing ourselves, and by the time the big boys get around to realizing what we're up to we'll be dug in.'

A nice little piece of British enterprise just driven right into the heart of America.'

Jock smiled then.

'Don't worry, Father, there'll be howls. When the profits are really getting fat. There may even be a roar in Washington. And you know what we do then? We howl, too. Another case of attempted discrimination by American interests against a small British company which is winning in the free enterprise struggle. We can get American public opinion against the lobbyists if we have to.'

'Jock, for heaven's sake! This isn't something on a scale on which we've ever operated, or ever could! We haven't the capital.'

'Not now, but we could get it. A share issue, for half a million to start.'

'No! This is a private company and it always has been. No one is going to own any block of me!'

'In that case no one will want to in about five years.'

It was a flat threat, delivered in a quiet voice, but it made the old man stare.

'What the hell are you getting at?'

Jock looked down at his highly polished tan shoes. Then up at his father again.

'Just this. Prefabrication in this country, of private houses, is a small thing yet. We've got six or seven important rivals, that's all. Two years ago we were beating them all. The patio house looked like it was putting us on top again, but the demand for it has slacked off. The compact house isn't ready yet. We're letting the markets go, Father, slip away from us.'

'That's a lot of nonsense! But if it was the truth, is this the time to go lunging off throwing money into America?'

'Yes,' Jock said. 'Just the time. While we've still got it.'

He leaned forward.

'Father, supposing one of the big building combines over here decided that prefabrication of domestic houses was now worth going into? With what they've got behind them and would put into it we could be wiped out in a year. Just like that. Don't you see, this isn't an age when you can sit back on what you hold and put out little feelers to get more. You've got to gamble, you've got to lash out, you've got to think big.'

'You've come back with a bad dose of America, haven't you?'

'I've come back with a solid plan to save Scotsroofs.'

'Save it!' The old man thumped his fist on the desk. 'Save it? Save my business? I'd get an offer for three quarters of a million for it tomorrow.'

Jock sat back again. He took out a cigarette, lit it, and blew out the smoke slowly.

'In that case I'd say this was the time to sell. Why don't you do it?'

'Don't be an idiot. I'm not selling because Scotsroofs is going to be yours, that's why.'

'I don't want to wait around to inherit a business on the down-grade.'

'Will you stop talking rubbish? Scotsroofs will be as sound ten years from now as it is today. We'll meet our competitors with new ideas, but on our own scale. As a family concern.'

Jock just smiled.

'You should hear what London and New York think of the old established family businesses these days. They wouldn't advance ten cents credit to them. We'd be the lousiest risk put up in any banker's day.'

'Will you stop using these damned Americanisms!'

'Look, Father, maybe I've been exaggerating a little and ten years from now we might still be jogging along as a family business. But I think there's a damn' good chance the skids would be under us by then. I know your family feeling for Scotsroofs and it's justified. Grandfather really started the business in his shirt sleeves. And I can't get away from the feeling that unless we're smart grandson may be back in them again. Father, will you look at a folder I've drawn up for you on this American business? Every statement in it has been triple checked. I haven't been trying to build up a rosy picture of the prospects over there at all, just a moderate one. And the whole thing is based on the simple fact that a Scotsroofs house uses minimum labour in erection, as you know well, five days' work here, three with American hustle. We're only paying American labour for those three days and for the concrete foundations. The rest of it is on British materials which are much cheaper, and British labour which costs about half the American, in some cases even a third. And that's where our profit comes in, over and above transport costs. Father, it's in the bag. We need to raise a million and we can get half of it on a share issue. Now please don't shout me down.'

Here's the folder. Just look it over. Tell me tonight what you think.'

Jock stood and walked towards the door. When he was at it his father shouted.

'I'll tell you now. I'm not listening to any of this!'

Slowly Jock turned.

'You won't even read my report?'

'I don't need to read it. Every suggestion you've made is against the principles on which I have conducted this business . . . all my life. Share issues! A public company. I don't like it. You can call me an old fogey if you like, but I haven't done too badly in my day, and you won't either in yours if you follow my road.'

'I can't follow it, Father.'

'What do you mean by that?'

'For me it's the wrong road. I believe if we carry on as we're doing we'll be throwing away the advantage we hold at the moment. You can't mark time in a game like ours, there's too much change going on, new techniques coming out all the time. You've got to be ready to exploit them, and to do that you've got to be big. We're too small. We can be got at too easily.'

'What did you mean, Jock, when you said you couldn't follow my road?'

Jock stood very still.

'I'll go to the States and take a job. I've had one offered me. Not a bad one. It's a company making pressed board from a new process with wood pulp. They'll be expanding rapidly, and it's my kind of game.'

He went out while his father was still staring in disbelief, walking quickly past Alice, up the stairs to his own office, sitting down and lighting another cigarette.

He wondered if he had played that trump card too soon, and then decided he hadn't. A kind of ultimatum was called for, and it should be borne in mind while the report was read. He had no doubt that his father had opened that report and was reading it, an old man who had let his cigar go out, sitting in a too hot office.

There was no job waiting for Jock in the States. The trump card was a lie, but that didn't make it any less effective.

SHEINA and Colin came up the hill from the town, both carrying sticks, Colin in a country suiting, the girl wearing a tweed skirt and soft green cashmere twinset. There was a wind and it kept lifting his pale, rather thin long hair.

'I should have worn a cap,' he said.

She smiled at him. This was escape; it didn't happen often these days; they seemed caught in crowds and family, as though a wedding arranged immediately set a pattern which didn't make much allowance of privacy for the two most concerned. There would be time enough for that later, but to Sheina the time was now, this time with its curious suspense, when they were committed but still walking warily, still a little cautious of each other.

Alone with Colin she was almost shy, something absurd but there, and it came partly from an uneasiness, a kind of instinctive sense that a man like Colin gave up a lot when he married. One thing about the Army was its ready-made companionships, and these were designed for the bachelor. The officer with a wife moved into another category, and the easy comforts and associations of Mess life were somehow put just slightly beyond him. Married he was at once senior and no longer really available.

Sheina knew that Colin went back to Perth not really dreading the days of separation as much as she did. She didn't doubt his love, knowing this, but it made an outing by themselves have a curious, urgent importance for her. At these times she had her chance to show what she was offering, more than just her love, an alternative way of living which he would come to want more than the other. He must come to want it more.

'T'his is the best way up,' he said, and they turned into Crieff Terrace.

The road flattened for its flanking bungalows and their neat gardens, then turned, and, after the last of the new buildings, dwindled into a path. At the corner was the Blanes' patio house.

'One of ours,' Sheina said.

He looked at it.

'I know. This used to be an agreeable road.'

'Don't be a snob, Colin.'

'But those things cost money. I can understand living in a Nissen hut if you have to. But wanting that! What does it cost?'

'Two thousand seven hundred and fifty,' Sheina said. 'And it's not at all bad inside.'

'It's hideous from here.'

'I'm sure I'll see worse married quarters.'

'Yes, but choice doesn't come into that. Somebody chose this.'

Clara Blane looked up at them. She had been weeding behind a hedge and heard. Her face was flushed from bending but the flush stayed. Sheina had a slight sick feeling of shame.

The woman's name! She must get it. But it was Colin who got it, and surprised her.

'Hello, Mrs. Blane. I didn't know you'd moved up here.'

Of course, the young laird! There were five thousand people in Kilmrudderie but it was his duty to know great chunks of them, to remember more than faces.

The flush on the woman's face might almost have been of pleasure. She still held the trowel, an odd quiet little woman, with a good deal of flesh on her in the places that men are supposed to like it. Sheina felt a pole, long and with jutting bones. She didn't believe she would ever acquire that look of easy rotund domesticity.

Mrs. Blane was watching them, smiling slightly.

'Good afternoon, Captain. And you, Miss Innis. It's a lovely day.'

'It certainly is,' Colin agreed, his voice loud. 'We're for the hill. And a spot of exercise.'

That should have been all, they should have moved away from a situation that Colin had handled, but somehow he didn't make the move. Mrs. Blane held them, by a kind of struggle going on, an effort she was making.

'I didn't really like it either,' she said, in a little rush of words. 'Not the front. You should see the back, though. You should really see it.'

Sheina wanted to cry, suddenly. It hit her like pain, their words loud in an afternoon spoiling something for a little woman who had climbed up into her dream. This was her house, fought for. She had come from down there.

'I'd like Colin to see the back,' Sheina said. 'We're proud of these

houses. And they're only plain at the front because the money's put where it matters.'

Mrs. Blane looked at her, still smiling. She nodded.

'That's right,' she said. 'Would you . . . come through?'

Colin didn't want to. He opened his mouth for the words of escape. Sheina got in first.

'We'd love to. If it's not too much trouble? Houses are rather much on our minds at the moment. Though I doubt if we'll have much choice for a long time.'

'You'll have Rosemount one day,' Mrs. Blane said. She put down the trowel. 'Would you come this way?'

She seemed determined, having seized something, to force herself to an end in it. They went into a little hall and then the door opened into the surprisingly spacious L-shaped living-room, which had been furnished to the taste of the women's magazines, two kinds of wall-paper, lamps on spikes with spotted shades, chairs slightly gross with a failure to be contemporary. The vast television set, though dead, shone at them.

But there was the wall of glass, and the paved patio with a flowering cherry and a little girl playing with blocks, a sweep of view behind her.

'There, Colin,' Sheina said. 'Lovely, isn't it?'

Mrs. Blane's smile was still defensive.

'We went all modern,' she said. 'I wasn't so sure of it. But it was my husband, really. He said since we were coming up here we ought to do things properly. And I must say it's easily cleaned, though what my mother would have thought I don't know. I sometimes picture her coming into this room. She'd be really lost.'

Sheina could see this, too, the bold sweep away of the past, not a reminder of it left, and sometimes this just a little terrifying. She could see Mrs. Blane coming into the room she had made and being stopped dead by the continuing strangeness of it, as though she hadn't yet quite established a right to treat it casually. She and her husband were a little frightened up here, a little uneasy on their hill.

'Would you like to see the kitchen, Miss Innis? I'm very proud of it. Some days I feel a fraud. I mean just being a housewife. There doesn't seem enough to do, even with Lucy. I get to thinking that I ought to have a job or something.'

To help pay for all the glitter, perhaps? And the kitchen did

glitter, crisply white and green, everything fitted, the stove, the fridge, the washing-machine. There was a shelf for the gadgets, the iron, the toaster, the electric frying-pan, and a small mixer.

Sheina went towards the sink.

'Why Mrs. Blane, no garbage disposal unit ?'

'Funny you should mention that. Jimmy was talking about it the other day. He saw it in one of my magazines and said we ought to get one. I said we'd just take a deep breath and pay for the things we have first. Goodness knows, that's going to take long enough. Won't you just have a quick cup of tea ? The kettle will boil in a minute ?'

It was Colin who got them out of that, smiling and amiable. They left the house, Sheina with the feeling that at least a bid had been made to cover up damage done. But she couldn't get away from it, the place seemed to be in sight from every turning, shining white amongst its sober neighbours, with the tiny figure of a woman again out in the front garden.

Colin whacked at a stone with his stick.

'What will Jimmy Blane get paid with your father ?'

'Oh, I don't know. He's a sort of foreman, of course. What does a foreman get ?'

'Lucky if he gets twenty, even a senior man. It's a lot on his back, isn't it ?'

'Does the thought of a lot on your back frighten you, Colin ?'

'I wasn't thinking of us. We don't have to do that kind of fighting. What a fool I was. I hope she'll forget. Let her enjoy her house.'

She caught his hand.

'Colin, there are times when I love you much more than normal. And normal's pretty good.'

'We're going to be a bit pushed, too, Sheina. At first. You know that ?'

'Of course. Do you think I mind ?'

The path narrowed, he helped her on ahead and came behind.

'Your father's bounty doesn't come in to this.'

She turned to him then.

'Darling, please stop !'

'I just wanted to say it, that's all. It never did from that first time at that party. No one else thinks that. . . .'

'What does it matter what anyone else thinks ?'

'We're bound to hear echoes of what they think.'

'Sweetie, I wasn't on the market with a fat dowry. This isn't France. It might be a good thing if it was!'

He laughed then, and so did she.

'It's all right, Sheina. I'm not saying I'll object to your lolly when you get it. But we're going to have a long time without it. Short rations, even. You don't know what that is.'

'I'll learn. I'll knit socks for Christmas presents. I'm a good knitter, oddly enough. Nanny taught me.'

'Nanny. There won't be one for our kids.'

'All right, my hands will get red from scrubbing. And Mummy will send us food parcels. Kiss me.'

He did. She lifted his fine hair with her fingers. He would be bald at thirty-five, forty at the most. She wouldn't mind. It would be a distinguished kind of baldness and he had the head for it. A bald colonel was always more impressive anyway. All Oriental soldiers shaved their heads.

'If you want to tickle my ears,' Colin said. 'Let's sit down to it.'

They had to search about in heather for a patch of grass, but it was soft when they found it. He dropped on to his back, catching her hand and pulling her down beside him. He turned over then, on to her body, pinning her down, holding her arms. His mouth was on hers for a long time.

'Well?' he said finally.

'Oh, Colin. It does happen. Knees turning to water.'

'Right reaction.'

Her lashes dropped over her eyes and went up again.

'You're so practised,' she said.

'Meaning what?'

'Meaning you've never told me about your other girls.'

'Oh! To hell with all women!'

The wind didn't reach them there amongst the heather. Far down below a train gave a faint, distant whistle, its activity trivial as it moved through the centre of the strath. The valley was bright with new colour, a sharp green that swept across it and climbed the opposite hills until it was dulled by more heather, the heather still brown, defining the undulating crests against the hazy blue of the sky. Some of the farmhouses were whitewashed, warmed to ivory by the sun, and the insect cars moved with a kind of searching frenzy along wavering lines drawn for them.

Colin closed his eyes. Sheina reached out and drew her finger down the length of his nose, gently. Then she let her arm fall by her side, feeling his hand hard against her shoulder.

She was glad this was his place as well as her own. She wondered then if he had the feeling she did when the train crossed the border at Berwick and ran into the low, wooded hills which had been so meanly rationed all the way north from London. It was a kind of small elation, a voice saying over and over, 'I'm back, I'm back,' and a series of joyous recognitions, the walls that climbed steep slopes, the brick houses changed for stone, and almost at once that increasing sense of space, of distances between the towns and cities, of the country dominant. There was room for five million Scots, breathing space for them, and at every back door were the hills.

They would travel, Colin and she, pushed around in Army postings with the regiment, and perhaps sometimes without it, maybe things like Staff College. It was one way to see the world, but she had the feeling sometimes that she wouldn't mind if she never saw it, that she could live all her life with curiosity not stretched beyond that almost mystical border which ran near the line on which the Romans had built a wall. All the rest would be impressions that you probably never even bothered to sort out properly, because they couldn't really matter much.

Perhaps this wasn't something she should say to Colin. It would be like admitting limits to one's ambitions in living, announcing that you were parochial in outlook, which is slightly sinful these days. It was Mummy who had organized the honeymoon on the Riviera to which they were flying, on the grounds that one had to have sunshine then, to wake to it each morning. Sheina wouldn't have worried about sunshine; Inverness would have pleased her perfectly well, except that Inverness would almost certainly have put fishing into Colin's mind.

'Are you asleep?' she asked.

'No.'

'Colin, you're sure you don't mind about having Jock as your best man?'

'Good heavens. Do we have to go into that again?'

He opened his eyes and looked at her.

'It's just that I don't want to force you into something you're not keen on.'

'It doesn't matter a damn.'

'That sounds as if our wedding didn't either.'

He grinned at her.

'I just don't think the best man is all that important. And anyone I brought from the regiment would almost certainly be suffering from a hangover.'

'If you are . . . I'll . . . Colin, I'm worried about Jock. Jock and father. Ever since Jock came home something's been wrong. It's been going on for two weeks now.'

'I must say I thought Jock was in damn' good form in our house that night.'

'It was after that. I think it was something that happened at the factory, perhaps the next day. They're so odd with each other. Both of them covering something up. Mummy's noticed it, too, I'm sure, though she hasn't said anything.'

Colin wasn't deeply interested.

'A row about policy, maybe? Up and coming young man back from America. And conservative papa. It's happened before.'

'It's almost as though they were bitter about something. They go off together every morning, but I've a feeling they don't speak the whole way. It gives me goose prickles at dinner.'

'I'm the only one who should do that. Sheina, it's a marvellous day. Relax.'

'All right.'

She sighed. He adjusted his arm under her, grinning again.

'It's not that I don't want you to bring me all your problems, dear.'

'Shut up, Colin. Do you have to go back to Perth this evening?'

'Yes. It's a Mess night.'

'Oh. Fun with the boys.'

'That's right. Too few left.'

'I could kill you!'

He put his hand under one of her breasts, cupping it. She wished suddenly that his hand was against her flesh.

Jock stood by the glass wall in his father's office, looking out at the old man who was putting potted geraniums into the bed flanking the drive. The gardener had a nice rhythm about his work, tapping each pot, lifting out the plant, sinking it in the waiting hole, firming it up, then moving on to the next. It would take him the whole afternoon to

finish the job. A motion-study expert would find no waste in technique, only in the pauses.

Jock opened one glass panel just a little, and then turned to his father. Will Innis was sitting there as though waiting for this.

'I've thought it all out,' he said to his son. 'It would still be a gamble.'

'Yes,' Jock agreed.

It would be absurd to pretend to himself that the last two weeks hadn't been a strain. There had never been at all any real easing of the tension. The old man had maintained it, a kind of grim brooding, the topic taboo between them while this went on. And somehow there weren't many other topics.

'Have you re-thought your ultimatum?' Will Innis asked.

Jock felt a stab of fear then, the uneasiness of a man who may have miscalculated badly. He had always known that what he wanted was a big step and his father would need some pushing to make it. He hadn't, though, been expecting quite this withdrawn resistance, a door slammed and kept shut. Now it was open again, but Jock couldn't feel that it had been opened to his advantage.

'You haven't said anything about going to America. Not again.'

'I've been too busy trying to get the compact house off the drawing-board. That was waiting to be done and I've done it.'

'Meaning just what?'

'I thought you'd want time to think about things, Father.'

'Aye. I've wanted time all right. But I've asked a question you haven't answered. Are you going to America if I don't do what you want?'

Jock took a deep breath. He felt oddly the small boy who has had his bluff called, and this angered him. It angered him more than that imposed period of strain. He was being brought low in his father's time and to his father's schedule.

'No, I'm not,' he said.

'And why not, if you have this job waiting?'

'I didn't say it was waiting, I said I could get it. But I won't go to it, because I want to stay here with Scotsroofs. And you.'

'Aye. So you've come to your senses?'

The old man smiled. It seemed, somehow, a long time since he had done that. The smile whipped up Jock's anger.

'No, I haven't come to my senses in that way. I'm not walking out

on Scotsroofs, but that doesn't mean I think our policy here is right. I don't. I can't pretend that.'

'I see. We're riding to ruin, is that it?'

'I think we could be heading for trouble. My solution to that is a gamble. You don't like gambles. So it's out.'

'Who said I didn't like gambles?'

'You shouted me down on this, Father. For God's sake don't let's go over it again.'

'Don't use that kind of language to me. Sit down, boy, sit down! I hate seeing people standing around.'

Jock sat down, still with that sense of being on the mat, of being called in to the Head. What he would do to this business when it was under his hands. What he would do to it! If it wasn't too late.

'One thing you said, Jock, and it stuck in my mind. If you don't go on you go back. That's sound business. It's true of any business at any time. Try to hold where you are and you've had it.'

Jock looked up from his shoes, surprised. Will Innis pounded the file with the American plan.

'This is wild. It's damn' near lunatic. But I won't deny it . . . I'm tempted!'

Jock half rose.

'Father . . .'

'Sit back, sit back! I read this the first time thinking of all that stuff about share issues in Scotsroofs. A public company so that we'd come in every day and look the papers to see how we were standing in the market. You needn't be surprised I was scunnered at that. It's never been the way I've done things. It's not the way I want to do them.'

'Then you can write off my ideas. We can't raise the money without it.'

'Who says so?'

'Father, I know perfectly well what . . .'

'I said, who says so? I've got a tidy penny put away. We could raise a quarter of a million on the business, a straight loan. I'd match it with another quarter of a million.'

Jock drew in his breath. In a voice a little thin he said:

'From your personal estate?'

'That's right.'

'Would you have anything left?'

'Aye. Enough to keep me from the street. I'd establish a trust for your mother. And I've got some rather unusual prospects at the moment. A speculation you might call it, except that the friends of mine in Glasgow who are going in for it are big enough to be able to speculate on the winning side nine times out of ten. You won't have heard of something called the Blachill Trust?'

'No. What's cooking?'

'I tell you in confidence. The Trust has been established for a while. A wee speculation on redevelopment you might call it. It now controls something like forty acres bang in the middle of Glasgow down for scheduled redevelopment as a new city. It's got a finger in a lot of other pics too. Mitcham in London is on to it. If he moves in, as seems a dead cert, it'll be the prettiest ride for the boys on the wagon that's been seen in these parts for some time. The shares are at nine and eleven. I'm buying twenty thousand. And I don't go for a pig in a poke.'

'Phew,' said Jock.

Will Innis smiled.

'Precisely. If I were a gambling man, of course, I'd put in a lot more. But this little venture isn't going to affect our getting the money we need. I'll be selling mostly, and it's not a bad time, the market's all right. We'll raise our half million.'

Jock sat very still for a moment. Half a million pounds, one and a half million dollars. It still wasn't enough. He shook his head.

'Father, I'm sorry, but I can't see us financing the American company and our own expansions here on that. Not on the kind of scale it needs.'

'Listen to me, boy, we can make a start can't we? You can raise money on your American company over there. I don't give a damn how many shares you sell in your Scotam or whatever you're calling it. Flood the market with them if you like. We'll start with what we've got, do our expansion, and maybe get American backing later. Or are you not up to it? Does that scare you?'

'No,' Jock said softly after a moment. 'It doesn't scare me.'

And yet his hand was trembling a little as he lit a cigarette. He saw what was happening, his father was pushing the American end right into his lap, willing to build up the necessary expansion here, but keeping Scotsroofs the feeder, a kind of parent company, with the offspring out where you could feel the wind howling. It was a com-

promise peace between them, much harder for him than the scheme he had outlined in that folder. But not impossible. It wasn't a challenge he was going to turn down, either.

'You're on,' Jock said.

'We'll have a whisky on it.'

The old man rose and went over to a Swedish cabinet with polished sliding panels. He took out a long-necked decanter and poured generously, the pale amber flowing into etched glass.

'Here you are then. I give you a toast, Jock. To the Americans, smart enough in all conscience, but not as wily as a couple of Scots. We'll hit them before they really know what's happening.'

They drank.

'Is it the compact house you're going for?'

'Yes, all out, Father. Nothing else at first. We've got to get the factory extension up in record time.'

Will Innis grinned.

'How about saying before Sheina's wedding, eh?'

'In production before Sheina's wedding. I'll fly out to Michigan just after it. What about Ferguson's field for the new building?'

'Aye, there's the rub. We haven't got the damn' thing. It would have been in the bag, but the Town Council have got it scheduled as a playing-field for the school. We'll have to go to the County Council to smash that. It's not good at all. But we'll make it somehow. We've got to have that field, Jock.'

'What about old Fairway-Campbell? Isn't he on the County Planning Committee?'

'Aye. He's the Convener. It's my bet he sleeps through all the meetings in the chair. Takes his high principles with him in place of a decent lunch and dozes over them.'

'You mean he wouldn't help us?'

'Not without a bloody thumb-screw on him. And I haven't got one. I'm the man that's paying for the wedding. And the trip to the Riviera and all. Sheina'll feel the pinch when she's living on her man's pay, I can tell you that. But she'll do it. We'll all feel the pinch for a bit, maybe. And Jock, if you bankrupt me . . .'

Will Innis began to laugh.

'I'll know I'm a damn' fool,' he said.

IO

THE spell of fine spring weather had gone on endlessly for Scotland, three weeks of it, day after day warmed by a sun well up in the sky, with real strength now. The farmers were beginning to grumble about the drought and they met each other in Kilrudderie banks with head-shakings, stuffing rolls of ten-pound notes into the back pockets of shabby trousers and carrying their public gloom out with them to waiting Jaguars and Sapphires.

In the High Street Parker's Scottish Drapers had cleared out a window to hang in it three limp wool dresses, as well as two hats mounted on chromium rods, one with a green feather, the whole tied together with a small printed label, slightly grubby, which said 'New Season's Modes'. The chemist was displaying Hollywood make-up, the greengrocer had out a chalked notice urging passers-by to get their tomato plants now. Jennie McTavish, hair stylist, had just bought herself a bright red Austin A40, which sat glowing outside her shop like a reminder that the future belonged to any enterprising girl who was willing to work hard doing setting and tinting at twelve-and-six a time.

Kilrudderie's commerce, cautious about any excessive proclamations of increasing prosperity was none the less being caught up in the tide of change and the ironmonger's had just mounted a new frontage in black and shiny outdoor plastic, with the town's second neon sign. The other stuck out in front of a pub called The Farmer's Rest. The picture house was advertising a third release of *Room at the Top* over an Adults Only certificate, in a bid to compete with summer come too soon. In the main hotel, twenty bedrooms and two baths, Mrs. Murdoch, after considerable deliberations had installed what was known as an American cocktail bar, completely fitted down to glasses by a concern in Glasgow, and for the privilege of exciting decor and lighting you now paid threepence extra on your whisky. The streets were full of cars, most of them new, in light contemporary colours, and the parking problem was chronic.

Up on the high ground the windows and verandas of the golf clubhouse had been given a new coat of garden green. The course

belonged to the Royal Burgh, and anyone could play for the fee, but the clubhouse was exclusive, calling itself, to the satisfaction of many a wag in the town, the Ladies and Gentlemen. When the Kilmuirderie Ladies met the Dunblane Ladies the standard of golf may have been indifferent but the social status of the players was unquestioned. If the Kilmuirderie Gentlemen had, in recent years, tended towards a certain lowering of standards, the Ladies still stood firm, not afraid to blackball. They stuck to rules which were never printed but none the less rigid. If you were married to a greengrocer you were not a lady. You were not, in fact, 'known'. For you were bright good mornings over a counter but never the cheerful rattle of teacups in the hillside drawing-rooms.

The town, famous for its rose gardens, had long been a Mecca to the retired, and over a third of the population was caught in this inactive phase, withdrawn into the mild torpor induced by a fixed income. They gardened and ate each other's home baking, and golfed, and once a year got into their cars and went to the Continent. To slack off in this annual pilgrimage across the Channel was to lose caste, worse even than not taking in a London musical bi-annually. It left one socially lost in the winter, with no rolls of colour film showing host and hostess posed against a Mediterranean background or braced against the lean of that over-popularized tower at Pisa.

Mrs. Mackenzie, Captain of the Ladies' Golf, had even spent three weeks in New Jersey, continuing on to Niagara Falls, and her lecture, with slides, on America, had proved a useful reserve with the Women's Association when the scheduled guest speaker failed to turn up. Mrs. Paton, the town's authoress, was interested in the Celtic Twilight and Levitation, and she lived in a lofty, turreted villa known as Hillbank where, according to their daily help, she wrote her historical romances late at night while her husband snored. And certainly a light could often be seen glowing out from a rounded window while most of Kilmuirderie was dark.

There was, too, Brigadier Brabazon-Folcy-foulkes who, perhaps long overburdened by his name, had now become a recluse, and kept behind a high hedge, avoiding bridge, tea-cakes and any sign of interest in the doings of the Town Council. His wife, a diminished woman in a huge, aged Morris, came down the hill once a week for supplies and in view of the whisky she took back it was said in *The Farmers Rest* that the Brigadier drank three nights a week and beat her.

On the whole the retired lived secure in their world apart, ignored by the landed gentry except twice a year at fêtes to raise funds for the Scottish Episcopal Church. The townspeople, too, were mainly indifferent, harbouring only a slight rancour over the golfing arrangements, but polite enough to keep the money coming down into plumbers and butchers and grocers.

There were, of course, a few attempts to bridge the social chasms and perhaps the most successful of these was the Kilrudderie Art Society, with a flourishing membership of a hundred and twenty, all of whom, weather permitting, did water-colours of the Scottish hills. No professional artist lived in the town, though there was a member of the Scottish Royal Academy only four miles to the west and the most promising amateur, a former tanker captain, had twice been hung in Edinburgh.

The Horticultural Society, also, provided another bridge, very active at all levels, the main emphasis on rose culture but with a minority who were knowledgeable about vines and peaches under glass.

The Church . . . and John McCall was troubled by this . . . couldn't be said to provide its bridge. The main body of his congregation were townspeople who still held, up to a point, with the inherited traditions but most of the retired, though nearer to eternity, appeared to ignore it. When a house changed hands and John discovered that the new tenants were not Episcopalians, he invariably called to offer the hand of fellowship. This was received with politeness but usually also with the suggestion that the newcomers, from an active experience of the world beyond Kilrudderie, had come to their own terms with the Almighty. Once or twice, provoked by this, he had gone on to hint at the necessary spiritual discipline of church membership but this had only earned him the label of being an impudent little man.

John wasn't easily defeated and though he realized the formidable task in front of him, he tried the organization approach, first with a Church Dramatic Society. This had failed, after the second season. There was then the Choral Union who were invited to use the Church Hall and did so until there were complaints from the adjacent property owners. He organized a series of lectures under a Literary Society, drawing on the talents of citizens long resident in India or the Far East, and though small huddles of the retired took advantage of these

cultural opportunities, the townspeople showed no interest at all in topics like 'Soil Erosion in Rajputana'.

John felt at times rather like a staff captain on a luxury liner, with a clear duty to the first-class as well as the tourist passengers, believing firmly in the brotherhood of man but being forced also to accept the fact that some had paid a lot more for their tickets. And the first-class mostly made it clear that they could do without him, that his duties lay with the rowdies on the lower decks.

There were other times when he surprised in himself the uncharitable thought that he didn't like the prosperous middle classes at all and in his heart he was quite willing to render them just the minimum services demanded, a very occasional wedding of a belated daughter and the funerals, which seemed to come neatly spaced out, as though so tidy a society could never allow itself to be shaken by too much sorrow all at once.

It was from one of these funerals that he returned on a fine May afternoon to find Vivian watering the herbaceous. She looked around at him, her eyes flicking over his sombre suiting, a quick inspection, then she remembered to smile. Above the hiss of water she called out:

'Did it go all right?'

It was her invariable question, part of her wifely duty, and Vivian never stopped to consider that there was small chance of a funeral not going. Oddly enough she had never asked, when absent from church herself, how his sermon had gone, perhaps because she already knew the answer.

'I can't switch this thing off, John. I wonder if she has left anything to the Church Fabric Fund?'

John stood in the middle of the manse lawn remembering the deceased. It was then as though he was given preview of her Will, twenty pounds per year of employment for each of her faithful retainers, three hundred and fifty pounds to the Society for Indigent Gentlewomen, two hundred and fifty pounds to the Orphanage for the Children of Soldiers and Sailors, and the residue, something in the region of seventy thousand, to two nephews and a niece of whose personal lives she had disapproved most sharply. She had, in fact, barred the door to even the usual duty visits.

Of all the many mysteries which encompassed him, the mystery of the way people left their money was only a small one but it seemed in many cases quite without reason or sense. Or at any rate the sense

which operated was nearly always that to those who have will more be added. The Church Fabric Fund would continue to languish at the figure of two hundred and forty-seven pounds which it had reached after the last sale of work and beetle drive.

'Will she, dear?' Vivian shouted.

'No,' John said.

'Could you turn this thing off for me at the tap?'

When he reached his wife again she was looking worried.

'Oh, John, the daffodil tea was a most awful flop. I've had Mrs. Haines here all afternoon, that's why I'm so late with the watering. She went on and on about it. Only seven pounds, four and three-pence. We can't blame the weather, either, not this time. We'll simply have to do something different next year, don't you agree?'

'Oh, yes,' he said absently.

Vivian frowned and he was reproved, reminded that her concern over the daffodil tea was part of something she gave him and against her inclinations at that. It struck him that their personal life, even their chance of happiness together, might well have been buried under an endless procession of unavoidable trivialities. These could be classified as duty for both of them but that didn't diminish their basic silliness.

What a lot he asked of her really, things that had always been a kind of torture and always would be. Perhaps the celibacy of the clergy was something the Reformation should have retained from Catholicism. A minister's wife had her husband's vocation laid over her neck like a halter; she had no choice. Some women didn't seem to mind, but the bustling brightness which encompassed the domestic life of many of his colleagues could be a defence mechanism when it wasn't just stupidity.

Vivian wasn't stupid. He knew that he had turned from those moments when she had seemed to be facing herself with dismay, pushing them aside with something that came near to flippancy. He had never offered her the love which he had tried to take with him about his parish, because that love was no substitute for a thing gone dead between a man and his wife.

It might be that she needed him now more from a deep-rooted inertia in her than anything else, a desire to escape change. Their life was sterile for her, nothing much but a duty undertaken to be seen through. Perhaps there was some consolation in duty held to like that,

though there wouldn't be for him. He knew he could never cling to duty as an end in itself, that without the recurring stimulus of his faith he would simply have walked away alone into a world gone dark.

'The herbaceous is beginning to look wonderful, Vivian.'

She turned to him startled, a sudden flush of colour coming into her cheeks.

'Oh, it's only the beginning. But the iris . . . I'm pleased with them. Those are the Dutch ones you got me, John.'

'Yes, I see.'

They moved towards each other and then stopped. The warmth faded. They were two middle-aged people standing in a garden with so much of life spent and not even thin hopes of a real brightness returning. They had better settle for routine now. And yet he felt a kind of bitterness against this, for both of them, as though he could see another life for her and for himself, too, in which each could have reached out for a bigger share of happiness. You didn't expect happiness when you were in the groove you had carved deep over the years but no man ever really stops wanting it, and no woman either.

'Let's have tea out here,' he said.

'Oh, John. Why, yes. You get the chairs, I'll get the tray. I won't take a minute. I'll make cress sandwiches. My cress has come on wonderfully. I've never had it so early.'

Perhaps there was something in this, the small occasion in which they catered exclusively for themselves and not the world around them. He began to have this feeling confirmed when, sitting together, he suddenly made her laugh at something about one of the Elders.

They were in their walled garden, shut away, reaching out to touch a kind of peace. And Vivian looked younger.

'Seconds?'

'Pour for me. I'll be back in a minute.'

He returned from his study with a packet of cigarettes in his hand, twenty Players. He had bought them with the feeling that the therapeutic value of smoking again would be good for her. He offered them now with a different feeling.

'I've got my pipe. I think you ought to.'

'But I stopped for economy. We're no better off.'

'No. And we won't be. May I give you a light?'

'Really it's silly, after seven years of doing without. How did you know I wanted to so much?'

'I don't think it's a luxury with us. A cigarette after Mrs. Haines and her daffodil tea results. Essential. Better than whisky.'

'Oh, John. It's like stepping into sin.'

She fumbled with the wrappings of the packet. Then distantly, there was the sound of the front door bell. They both stiffened.

'What on earth . . . ?' Vivian began. 'I'll go.'

Some instinct made him rise and follow her to the house, as though he knew he would have to soon enough. She met him in the kitchen.

'It's the Provost. He's wearing his chain-of-office look. I know he's going to ask you to do something.'

'Where is he?'

'In the study. Oh, John, don't get mixed up in anything political. You know how frightened I am of that for you. That man only comes here when he's trying to work something through you.'

'He's one of my Elders.'

'Only because he thinks it will help him at next year's elections. Oh, I shouldn't have said that. But it's true and you know it!'

'You never took a light for your cigarette,' he said. 'Here are my matches.'

He kissed her on the cheek. She seemed almost to withdraw and then steady herself. He closed the kitchen door, leaving her standing there.

Will Innis had always believed subconsciously that the world was divided into the people who got on and the people who knew their place in it and stuck there. He didn't like that pattern disrupted. He certainly didn't like John McCall coming to see him on a matter which could in no way be considered part of the duty of a clergyman, particularly during office hours.

'The Provost has put you up to this, McCall. You don't need to tell me.'

'He came to see me yesterday.'

Will thumped the desk. He liked to punctuate his sentences before he began them.

'Now look here, I have always played straight by this town. I know that I shouldn't be the one to say it, but Kilrudderie owes a great deal to me. A very great deal indeed.'

Will warmed to his theme. He pictured himself as a faintly paternal figure, set up above the place on which he sent a gentle rain of money via wages and good works. He was the key in the pattern of the town's

commercial life and he had always kept Kilrudderie's interests clearly in view in everything he did.

John sat looking as though he had heard all this before but was prepared to be patient. And Will, as though realizing he had raised his voice, lowered it suddenly.

'I want Ferguson's field,' he said. 'Surely that's not a big thing to ask, in view of what I do for this place? I can't understand the attitude of the Council on this; out to baulk me, that's what they are. Cutting off their own noses. If I don't expand my business may go to the wall. If I do there will be more jobs here.'

'The Council feel, Mr. Innis, that you could build your new factory on the other side of the main highway.'

'Do they? So that I'm split up in this town? One half of my works here, the other half a quarter of a mile away? And all because of a school playing-field. Only it isn't all because of that at all. This business of getting a factory built across the highway is one of the Provost's pet projects. He wants a miniature industrial estate down there. It's a lot of nonsense. This town isn't going to attract any industries but mine, I can tell you that right now. I only stay here out of a sense of duty. I could take my business to Perth any day, and save from doing that. But I won't desert this town. All I ask in return is a little consideration.'

John cleared his throat.

'I'm here today, Mr. Innis, to ask you to reconsider your refusal to meet the Town Council about this matter.'

'Why should I meet 'em? I'm not going to have a pack of jumped up johnnies telling me how to run my business. About all they're good for is siting public conveniences. And they don't do that very well. Putting one behind the Town Hall was a scandal!'

John sat up a little straighter.

'The County Council have already scheduled Ferguson's field as a school playing-ground. Are you going to ask them to reverse this decision?'

'I certainly am. And I expected Kilrudderie to back me up on this, when they saw the larger issues involved.'

'What are the larger issues?'

'I need the place, that's all. It's essential to me. I can't extend without it. I'm not building a new factory down there across the highway. Let them put the playing-field down there.'

'It would mean the children walking through all the town traffic, and then across the bypass. The parents here object strongly to the idea. It isn't only the Council, Mr. Innis.'

'Let 'em find another field somewhere!'

'There just isn't one available. And the one you want joins the school. It's a natural choice.'

Will glared.

'What's your role in all this?' he asked.

John smiled.

'I imagined a kind of mediator. I don't seem to have been too successful. But I think I should say right now that there is strong opposition in the town to the idea of you simply taking this field for your factory. A great many people are going to be angry if that happens. I think it is something we should avoid if possible.'

'Look here, McCall, when you come on business I don't like this padre act. It's not the time for it. My position is simple. Any fool could see it. If I can expand the way I want to there will be more jobs going in Kilmallock. Maybe plenty of them. Isn't that what the town wants?'

'We don't have unemployment at the moment. If more labour is needed it will mean that you have to bring it in. And that will mean more housing. The town will have to find that housing. Unless you mean to build Scotsroofs houses for your new workers?'

'I certainly do not! Housing is the town's business, and the country's.'

John smiled again.

'By which you mean the taxpayers?'

'Certainly. Why not? I'm damn' well one myself. I'm not wet nursing this town, you know, for all I'm always willing to help it.'

'You will admit, though, Mr. Innis, that this ought to mean that the townspeople, as taxpayers, have a say in how their taxes are spent? And if the majority of them feel, as they seem to, that Ferguson's field ought to be kept to its original planned use . . . ?'

'I've had enough! I've really had enough. You're talking now like a mouthpiece of the Provost. And I'm surprised that you should come here in that guise. I've never got on with the man, and that's a plain fact. He shouldn't have been provost in the first place, and if you think I'm going to give him the satisfaction of appearing in the Council Chambers while he waggles that damn' chain at me, you can

think again. All of you. I'm not stating my case down there, because there's no need to. But I'm fighting this, I can tell you.'

'It was in the hope of avoiding a fight that I came here today.'

Will laughed.

'Then I'm afraid your mission hasn't been a success. Look here, McCall, I know perfectly well that there's a faction down there who don't like me. Socialists, that's what they are!'

'We have only two Socialist members on the Council, and one of them is neutral on this issue.'

'That's not the point, I'm not talking about the labels they wear. It's what they think. If you want the plain fact they're jealous of me, as they were of my father. You can't get on without making people jealous, McCall. It's petty but it's there. They want to do me in on this business more to annoy me than anything else.'

John rose.

'I would have said that a lot of their wives are concerned about the danger of children run down by lorries. I don't think there is a great deal more in it than that, Mr. Innis. It seems to me a comprehensible reason, and I can see why the Council wants to talk with you. I'm sorry you won't do that.'

John said a polite enough good-bye and went out. From his desk Will watched the Minister appear in the driveway and mount his bicycle. He didn't run to a car, apparently. That was a bit of an affectation, surely? The man had eight-fifty a year and a free house. On that you could run a Ford all right. But maybe the bicycle was a better gesture, it didn't rouse feelings of jealousy amongst your parishioners.

The bike, with John on it, went past the parked Bentley, wobbling a little, then straightening out on its course to the gates. Will looked at his hands on the desk in front of him and then up to the wall, and along to the picture of Scotsroofs as it had been before a war and a housing shortage had given such a fillip to the business.

Maybe Lizzie was right and the wedding should have been with the Piskies. Why the devil did the fool have to mix himself up in something like this, taking sides? You wouldn't find one of the Piskies doing that, or if he did it would be to come down on the right side. No Socialist nonsense with them.

Jock came in suddenly and unannounced.

'I saw McCall going away. What was that all about?'

'The field, blast it! We've stirred up a hornets' nest down there.
They're not going to give in easily.'

Jock went to the glass wall and stood looking out.

'We've got to have the field. It isn't really the business of the Town
Council any more. Why not bypass them?'

'It's all very well, but how?'

'I suggested seeing the Colonel.'

Will shook his head.

'He won't play. You needn't bash your head against that. This will
probably have to go to Edinburgh. I'll take it there and fight it there.'

'Meanwhile we're held up. Father, will you let me have a try at
this? I have an idea. I don't want to talk about it, but it might work.
Will you leave things with me for a day or two?'

II

DR. THOMAS HILL was practically a happy man, forty-four years of age, and still with a good digestion which he attributed to cold baths in the morning, eighteen holes twice a week in summer, and badminton on winter evenings. In World War Two, newly qualified, he had spent most of his time at base hospitals in moderately agreeable areas and had emerged forward-looking and progressive, voting for the Labour Government which had put Mr. Attlee in and Mr. Churchill out. In later years he had sensibly revised his politics and now was a moderate if undemonstrative Tory.

He had never, at any time, taken part in the clamour within his profession against the National Health Service which he considered essential to the period and on the whole efficient. It certainly contributed to his own pattern of life in that as a G.P. in a small town he had a sound income verging on three thousand a year and his work, though it kept him at it, involved less strain than might be imagined, for he regarded himself as a kind of field station in the vast system, his function to diagnose when possible and when this wasn't easy, to pass his patients higher up the chain.

He had an excellent bedside manner, designed to put it across to his patients that with modern medicine anything was possible and there was always hope. And when one of them died he managed to convey to the surviving relations a suggestion that the patient himself had been more than slightly to blame for 'not taking a grip'. When in doubt he recommended holidays, for nothing braced you up so much as a change of air. He himself went regularly to the Continent for a month each year, with his brisk wife, once a hospital Sister, and their two rosy children, a boy and a girl, who had started off life on National Orange Juice and never really looked back, measles and whooping cough just incidents.

Dr. Hill was deservedly popular, he had time for old ladies and young mothers, and his pleasure over pregnancies suggested that he regarded every new arrival as a potential addition to his list. The solid foundation for his prescribing rested on a stomach sedative and a nostrum for the relief of chest inflammation, and the local chemist

had large stocks of these made up and ready to pour into the shilling bottles.

The Doctor stood now beside Archie Garr, knowing that the old man was going to die. He had known this as a certainty for some time and it had been at the back of his mind to do something about it. Today he had come prepared.

He looked at Elsie with the professional detachment of a man whose role in life is in no way concerned with sin. The girl impressed him up to a point, her nursing was efficient and for one of her age she was certainly devoting herself to the task with an astonishing degree of application. She had, in fact, earned her relief, whatever the town might think on that score, and he was glad to be bringing good news.

'I'm afraid there is nothing much more I can do to help him, Miss Garr.'

'No, Doctor. He's past help.'

'I've been thinking about this. It isn't easy, of course, these days, but you'll be glad to know that I've got your father a bed at last.'

'In hospital you mean?'

'Yes, Perth. It's a bit far, but it can't be helped. And I don't think the journey will do him any harm. The ambulance will be coming this evening.' He looked at his watch. 'In about a couple of hours, as a matter of fact. That is, of course, if you're agreeable?'

'No, I'm not,' Elsie said.

He turned then to face her. They looked at each other in a silence only disturbed by a sound of breathing that was rapid and noisy, but somehow suggested a determined continuance in living.

Dr. Hill was startled. He wondered for a moment if he had heard her correctly. What he had done was in a sense a charity, for the old man was something of a problem, and not one easy to deal with, too ill for an old people's home, not really ill enough for a bed in a medical ward where the demand for these exceeded the supply. It was no simple matter to find niches for cases like this, liable to be a continuing responsibility for some time. The Superintendent had been difficult enough to convince, for there was no treatment involved, just a waiting, a bed in use that might have to be behind screens for a good deal of the time for the sake of the other patients.

'Miss Garr, I assumed you wanted the best for your father.'

He felt almost huffed, his voice stiff.

'If there was any cure, of course, Doctor. But you've said there isn't. That way I'd rather have him here.'

He frowned.

'May I be frank? It was something of a surprise in this town that you came home at all to look after your father. I don't suppose it can be too pleasant for you living here. It was that in my mind which made me look on this as an urgent matter. I thought it would free you.'

Elsie smiled then and he was a little startled by that.

'You mean I'd be free to leave? But I've nowhere to go, Doctor. I might just as well stay here. It gives me something to do . . . looking after him.'

'He's not conscious of what you're doing!'

'That's right,' she agreed.

'Are you asking me to cancel my arrangements? Look here, I must say frankly that you won't be able to change your mind on this. If we turn down this chance there won't be another.'

'I'd rather he stayed in Kilrudderie. And I'll stay with him.'

They went down the stairs together, the girl a step or two behind him. He was conscious of her now in a way that he had deliberately avoided being on earlier visits. She had, in a sense, challenged his authority, almost defying it. What she was doing was pointless and silly; it served no useful purpose at all, either for the old man or for herself. The plain fact was that she would be better out of Kilrudderie; she had become a kind of point of scandal in the town. This didn't affect him directly but it was there, and he heard echoes of it on his rounds. A community like this was close-knit, and you couldn't just cast it off and then come back again when it suited you. The girl was using her father's house as a kind of escape. And if she went on doing it the pressures would mount up, all kinds of pressures.

In the hall he faced her again. After all most people used their doctor as a confidant. He must be prepared to hear her point of view before passing judgment.

'Have you strong reasons for wanting to stay here?'

'I have reasons. I don't know whether they're strong or not. But I needed something like this to do just now. That's all.'

Good heavens, some kind of compensation, psychiatric stuff. To be avoided by the G.P. if he had any sense.

'Very well. The decision is with you. I just hope you don't come to me for help later, because I'm afraid I won't be able to give it.'

'I'd like a new prescription if you don't mind. Your bottle is finished.'

'Oh, yes, certainly. Is Nurse coming in the mornings still?'

'Only twice a week, Doctor.'

'Really?'

Nurse appeared to be washing her hands of things, too. He walked briskly into the kitchen, put his bag on the table, got out his pad and scribbled on it.

'The chemist is shut, I'm afraid. But go to his house door. You'd better have more of the pills, too. Call me if there's any change, will you? I won't be in tomorrow or the next day.'

The girl was smiling a little, as though she was perfectly conscious of the fact she was being pushed off and accepting it. She went with him to the door, politely, and he heard it click behind him when he was on the path.

He got into the new Ford Zephyr frowning. Patients who resisted the organization deserved to be left out in the cold. He switched on the ignition and slammed into gear, the car spurting out into the narrow road. After all, a certain measure of discipline was essential, there had to be planning, decisions all down the line. He took the ones he believed to be right at his level.

What the devil was wrong with the girl? She looked healthy enough. She looked, in fact, as though she had everything under control. When you thought of it she might even enjoy being back in this place. She had been trained to expect publicity, needing it in her life. Perhaps the kind of publicity she was getting here was better than the complete indifference of somewhere like London.

When the old man went would she stay?

The Zephyr nosed across the High Street and up a sharp, steep hill. It was scarcely run in and the feeling of reserve power even on the higher gears pleased him. He got a new car every second year, the same make and the same model, big enough for the trip to the south of France. This year it was going to be Italy, as far down as Rome. It would mean a lot of driving, but Marilyn didn't mind taking her share. The kids would probably get stomach upsets from the olive oil, but they'd take that in their stride. It was only three months off, too.

He shut the door on Elsie Garr in his mind, in the trained manner, and nosed his car into the area in front of the surgery. He went in by the patients' door and from the waiting-room to the kitchen. There was a smell of something with garlic, for Marilyn was practically 'Cordon Bleu' as a cook, always finding time for it, an odd development really with a nurse. A lot of the chaps he knew who had married nurses got mince thrown at them.

'Hello, darling.'

He was almost always pleased he had married her, she stayed cool and crisp, even over a cooker.

'Tom! I didn't hear you.'

He went over and lifted the blonde hair from her neck, nuzzling it.

'Silly,' she said, but not moving away.

She looked at him as though she was quite ready to put the emphasis on his being home, even though the kids were still making a row in the front room. It might be time they started another. They'd talked about it.

'No phones, Marilyn?'

'Oh, heavens! I forgot. I'm slipping.'

He smiled.

'I don't see it. Who is it this time? One of my old dyspeptics?'

'No. It's Rosemount. Mrs. Colonel.'

'What? She's never ill.'

'That's what makes it urgent. The Colonel phoned. She's had some kind of collapse.'

'Good Lord! I'd better get up there.'

'Don't be too long, Tom. I was planning on this in half an hour.'

'I can smell it. I'll be back.'

The car climbed through the villas of the retired, past the upper levels where all the heart cases were more or less kept prisoner. Hester Fairway-Campbell. He could never remember attending her except once when she sliced her finger with a carver, and then the Colonel had been in a flat spin. Heart? Could be. Lean, tense, nervous type, you could see the pulse beating amongst the tendons on her wrist when she held it out. The old doctor had kept them on as private patients even after the change over, but they'd switched when he came into the picture. The mighty saving pennies. Well, he didn't mind that, better to have them on your books than to be called in for a fee once every three years.

Rosemount looked a bit like policies affected by eczema without its trees, the places where they had been not yet healed. He noticed the open sagging gates as he drove through and wondered if they could be shut now without falling off their hinges. Who in their senses wanted a lot of land these days? They'd be better off with a Scotsroofs house amongst the villas, though the Colonel would probably pull down a shot gun at the suggestion.

The Zephyr did a nice sweep up to steps trimmed with long unpainted iron railings. He got out and went up them, carrying his bag, his hand altering the angle of his black felt slightly.

'Thank heaven you're here, Doctor,' the Colonel said, opening the door himself. 'I phoned half an hour ago!'

'I was out on a case, I'm sorry. And I'd only just got back from Perth. Where is Mrs. Fairway-Campbell?'

'I got her to her room. She's lying on the bed there. . . ?'

Extraordinary how these military types went to pieces in a domestic crisis. Perhaps it was because they had learned to associate death with bullets. On the stairs the Doctor said,

'What happened, exactly?'

The Colonel looked old, and suddenly smaller, a frightened man, as though he had been staring at something he had never seen before.

'I came in from my hens. Hester was sitting down in the kitchen. I'd never seen her that colour. Grey. I . . . She couldn't speak for a minute or two. She said. . . ?'

'Yes?'

'She felt . . . gone.'

They were walking along an upper hall. Boards creaked sometimes under thick dusty Turkey carpets. The Doctor noted the shabbiness, the pictures hanging there as though no one had touched them for a quarter of a century, vast etchings in gilt frames of the inevitable Highland animals.

'In here, Doctor.'

Clearly they didn't share bedrooms any more. It was a woman's room, surprisingly feminine when you considered the occupier, almost frilly, somehow out of character. The bed had chintz flounces around the bottom and the chairs matched it. There was a vast Victorian dressing-table with one of those mirrors that was big enough to go on repeating into infinity the reflection from a wardrobe full-length.

Hester Fairway-Campbell still looked grey. She opened her eyes and seemed about to say something. He took her pulse, lifting her arm gently. It was irregular, but not alarmingly so. Her breathing was quick, a little like that of someone afraid. He turned to his case for a thermometer and put it into her mouth, sliding it under her tongue.

Behind him was the Colonel, holding on to a bed end, his hands around a knob. In his mind Tom was getting his manner ready. He knew the one to use for this occasion.

'I think I'll live,' Hester said through the thermometer.

Tom smiled.

'I'm quite sure you will, Mrs. Fairway-Campbell.'

He took out the thermometer and shook it. Her temperature was sub-normal, as he had expected. Like one of those patent aspirin ads. 'A degree under, take Blinko.'

He leaned forward and pulled down her eyelids, then nodded.

'Doctor, what . . . ?'

Tom turned.

'It's not good for your wife to see that expression, Colonel. There's nothing to worry about.'

'Thank heaven!'

'I told you,' Hester said.

'But for all that we'll get you to bed. A couple of days, I think.'

Hester stirred.

'I can't possibly . . . ?'

'You're going to have to, Mrs. Fairway-Campbell.' It was his firm, decisive manner, designed for the troublesome to whom the doctor was a rare experience. 'Two days at least. And if you do what you're told. Now we'd better have someone up to help you settle in.'

Hester smiled.

'It'll have to be my husband. We only have someone in the morning.'

Tom was startled. It was a thing he hadn't heard about, no permanent help in this vast house. No wonder the mistress of the place had been found sagging in her kitchen. It was probably flagged, and damp, bad for feet. She might well be concealing pain from varicosed legs. There was certainly an abnormal venous dilation on the hands, even relaxed.

Later he went with the Colonel into the study downstairs. In the

hearth were the ashes from a wood fire, but no glow. Those ashes looked as though they had been cold for a very long time.

'It's more or less what I said upstairs, Colonel. I wasn't concealing anything in front of her.'

'I was afraid of her heart,' the Colonel said.

Tom cleared his throat.

'Overture can be a kind of heart poison, you know. I'd say she needs more than that couple of days in bed, but we'll start there. She's clearly been overdoing. And if you take my advice you'll plan to go away next month, for the whole of it if possible.'

The Colonel looked at him and then away again. He opened a cigarette-box and held it out to Tom, who shook his head. He had given up smoking after the third article in the *Lancet*.

'A holiday,' the Colonel said as though to himself. 'Yes, I suppose we should think of it. It's . . . a little difficult with my son's wedding coming off.'

'I thought that wasn't for a time.'

'No, not at once of course. But women find a great deal to do before these things.'

The man was shaken, and not rallying even yet. It had never occurred to Tom to regard Colonel Fairway-Campbell as an old man, but suddenly he looked it. It was more than just that, too. He was someone out of his time and place, who had found this out.

Rather pathetic really. We had bred in Scotland a whole small class of professional soldiers, almost mercenaries for England, and now the ones with any sense had to face the fact that they weren't needed. Fifty years from now, if we hadn't all been blown up meantime, there wouldn't be such a thing as a Scottish regiment left. The taxpayer simply wouldn't go on paying just for a spot of local colour on ceremonial occasions. He'd pay for the scientist who pressed the button on the rocket, but not for successive generations of Fairway-Campbells. Technological advance was just wiping a small group off the social map.

'I'd recommend abroad,' Tom said. 'It needn't be a frightful outlay, Colonel. Portugal, for instance, is supposed to be very reasonable. And I believe you can go on a wine boat from Glasgow, if you don't want to fly. Actually, a sea voyage would just be the thing for your wife. Is she a good sailor?'

'Oh, very.'

'Well, then. Think about it. Something of that kind. Change of climate and scene. Plenty of sun. I know it's a bit of an upheaval, but we should all make ourselves do it. Do it myself every year, with the kids.'

'Yes, I've heard, Doctor. Very enterprising of you. I can't see myself taking my car on to the Continent, however. It's fourteen years old.'

Tom didn't suggest that it was time he got a new one. But suddenly he felt a little irritated, all this front and nothing behind it but poverty. It wasn't even a pretty house, why cling to it?

He remembered the garlic smell in his own kitchen and briskly wrote out a prescription, a sedative, mild enough. It could do no harm and as yet there was no reason to get in touch with Perth about this woman. He rose, smiling.

'I'll look in again tomorrow morning, Colonel.'

Hamish closed the door before the Doctor's car moved off and then stood for a moment behind it.

Portugal! The bloody fool!

He walked slowly down the hall and into the study again. He used the telephone and then climbed up to Hester. She lay watching him come into the room.

'There was no need for the flap, Hamish. I'm feeling better already.'

He looked at her.

'I've organized things. We're having Mrs. Menzies the whole day as from tomorrow morning.'

Hester tried to sit up and then decided against it.

'That's silly. We don't need her and we can't afford her. Have you paid the rates yet?'

'No. I'll do that when I get my bonus from that oil.'

'Oh, Hamish. I'm sorry. I'm furious at myself.'

'Stop it, Hester! You're ill and you've got to take it easy for a bit. Why didn't you tell the Doctor about that pain in your side?'

'Because it's wind, that's all.'

'You don't know!'

'Of course it is. I'm not crocking up, Hamish. I'm not letting myself. And I won't be browbeaten into doing it by you. So don't come the Colonel of the Regiment on me.'

'I'm telling Hill about that pain tomorrow.'

'Don't you dare, Hamish. Oh, please! I don't want anything to go wrong just now. I'm . . .'

She stopped suddenly. He sat down on the bed beside her and took her hand. Her fingers tightened against his. He seemed to feel then the huge old house about them, empty, the two of them in this room and all the others deserted with the fine evening sunlight shining in on the unused chairs and the stripped beds. He was conscious too, of the pretence which had been his, in a sense forced on Hester, the propped-up sham of their façade of living. He had been the one who insisted on trays brought all the long way from the kitchen, and the appointed meals, for which he didn't just wash up after the hen-houses, but changed and sat down, keeping up a farce of the old traditions. Hester didn't remember this house in his father's day, for the old man had been ailing then and routine disrupted. But the routine had been a discipline and all the rituals had somehow made a pattern. In his day he'd been chasing that vanished pattern and mostly at Hester's expense.

The time had come not to pretend those rooms weren't empty.

'Hamish, what are you thinking about?'

'This house. It wouldn't be a kindness to leave it to Colin.'

'What?'

'Hester, don't worry about it just now. Would you like some tea?'

'No. I want to know what's on your mind!'

'I was just wondering if we couldn't sell Rosemount?'

'Who would buy?' she asked so quickly that he knew she had thought about it, and often.

'Could be an hotel, couldn't it?'

'Way up here? It would miss all the passing traffic and that's what an hotel lives on these days. Besides, we're all right, Hamish, we're making out. And there'll be Sheina's money for Colin, when they get it. They won't have to live like we do.'

'Some of the furniture is quite valuable. We'd get a fair price for it.'

'Hamish, please! Not just now. Have you collected the eggs?'

'Oh, no.'

'Well, go and do it. I'm fine, don't bother about me. Give me a boiled egg for my supper. Will you manage?'

'Of course. Anything else?'

She smiled.

'I know this is silly. But I wonder if you could . . .'

'What is it, old girl?'

'Just that I'd rather like to have you in here with me tonight. I feel sort of alone. Would you mind terribly?'

'What a weird thing to ask your husband. To share your bed!'

She smiled.

'Yes, isn't it?'

He was surrounded by emptiness on those stairs, and the quiet. He thought of his hens, the long houses full of crooning, rustling noise, rows and rows of occupied compartments in the vast dormitories, with water running by and food waiting, and warmth and a kind of contentment. People said it was cruelty, he never felt it. Every night about this time he did his inspection like a messung officer going around for complaints. He never got any.

The front-door bell rang as he was going through a baize door to the back passages. He turned, cut off in his project for a brief escape, and irritated. For a moment, with the door open, he just stared at Jock Innis.

'Colonel?' Jock was smiling. 'Is this a bad time to call? I thought I'd get you before dinner.'

'Dinner? Oh. But come in, Jock. Yes, do.'

What the devil did this fellow want? Some business about Colin and being best man? Still, you had to be civil under the circumstances. Produce the whisky, too.

'My wife's a bit under the weather,' he said. 'Bed down and all that. Come this way.'

Jock was sorry to hear about Hester. His manner was almost soft, cautious, his voice never raised. In this he was very unlike Will who had bellowed himself through life and would probably go out that way.

'Fire's out,' Hamish said as though this surprised him. 'Chilly. I can put on a heater . . .?'

'Please don't. I'm not in the least cold.'

He sat down, though, like a man who wouldn't be leaving in five minutes. The fellow had shoes with a shine on them that looked like they were done twice a day. And he stared at his shoes with a kind of satisfaction. Come to that, he was all satisfaction, neatly tucked into a small package. Hamish wondered if women loved Jock easily. Probably. They liked the types who moved tidily through life and took

them along for the ride. It was what every woman wanted in her man, to ride in the sidecar of a shiny machine with firm hands on the steering controls just above them.

Hamish was a little startled by his own perception then and wondered if it came from the feeling of defeat which had caught him that afternoon and which he had allowed to show.

'I'm sure you like people to get straight to the point,' Jock said, smiling. 'And I'll try to do that.'

'Before you do, what about a whisky?'

'No thanks.'

Decent of him not to think himself worthy. But perhaps he imagined it would be like the gin.

'Mind if I smoke my own cigarettes, Colonel? I got corrupted in America and I use their brands. I've come tonight on business for Father and me. We're in a jam. It's Ferguson's field.'

Hamish took a deep breath and, as though propelled by it, was suddenly in another compartment, that of the County Councillor. He didn't quite know why he clung to public office, the petrol allowance made it a financial loss, but his father had always held to the view that if you didn't watch the local government chaps they'd be up to something. That was what he regarded as his role, a kind of watching brief which produced sporadic and undeliberated outbursts of protest. He was often quoted in the local Press as a kind of reactionary dragon and was not displeased by this. There had been two columns on his denunciation of an expenditure of a hundred and seventy pounds for stage curtains in a new school building. For some reason they had to be velvet. Socialist squandering, he'd called it, and that's precisely what it had been.

'We want that field, Colonel,' Jock said quietly. 'We've got to have it. There's no alternative for us.'

'Out of my hands, I'm afraid. The thing's already scheduled . . . school playing-ground.'

'But you run the Planning Committee.'

Hamish smiled.

'Don't flatter me. I'm Convener. I don't say that means a lot. As a matter of fact I voted for the thing to go to the school. Months ago. I didn't even know your father was after it, or if I'd heard, I'd forgotten. Essential for the school really, when you look at it. I thought your father had come to accept that?'

'He hasn't,' Jock said.

Hamish was suddenly wary. He couldn't quite believe that pressure was going to be put on him as the future father-in-law of Sheina, that this alliance between families was something on which the Innises felt they could presume. But it wasn't quite like that. Jock remained the amiable supplicant, not stating claims, just giving an account of Scotsroofs plans and their overall benefit to the community of Kilrudderic. The young man made it quite plain that these plans were something new, practically revolutionary, and that he had lit the fuse under them. Kilrudderic might see an almost explosive expansion and prosperity as a result. Jock remained modest, but confident, smiling sometimes.

Hamish, waiting quietly, again had the sharp feeling that he would have had this young man chucked out of his battalion, but that in the process, as so often happened in the Army, he might suddenly find the fellow set up as G.1 at Divisional Headquarters, red tabs and all, with the power to send lesser men to perdition from the planning board. It was a distressing fact that some of the most successful soldiers as career men had never been regimentally popular, and with good reason, for higher up you could do without any humanity, in fact it was a bit of an encumbrance. Probably a half colonel was about the top rank for the man who could never think of other soldiers as digits. Above that you needed the kind of perspective which provided its own immunity and your heart, from the practice of its disciplines, remained stonily your own.

The only Divisional Commander Hamish had really liked had committed an act of operational folly. He'd lost a battalion during a retreat and had leaped on a railcar to look for it. The enemy shot him up. The incident was glossed over in the official history of that campaign; it didn't make sensible reading in that it was no part of the general pattern of disciplined behaviour.

He felt certain that Jock might have been caught in the bombing of an H Q. but he would never have given way to an impulse to jump on a railcar.

Jock was talking now about competition in the modern world. It was a kind of war, the Colonel would understand that; if you tried to hold a position in any static sense it was almost certain you would be overrun. If you once lost your aggressive spirit you lost the battle, try to dig in and you'd had it.

Hamish appreciated the military similes, they were well chosen and appropriate. He had no doubt at all that business was the battle-field of the future, and that selling plastics and packaged houses as cheaply as possible was the best contemporary defence of democracy. It only made him slightly thankful that he was old enough to have lived in a period when guns were still used to do that. He had out-lived his own world really, and was suddenly rather sorry for Colin and the compromises he was going to have to exist with in the new one. Hamish knew perfectly well that except for the rather absurd accident of his being Convener of the County Planning Committee he would have been a non-combatant in this particular battle.

'I can't really see anything I can do at this stage, Jock.'

'You're rather celebrated, sir.'

'What for?'

'Your stand against waste.'

'Oh, that. Is there a parallel with this?'

'We think so. A waste of efficiency. Scotsroofs asks a simple favour for which it is almost certain to return enormous benefits to the community. My father and I hoped that you might look at it this way.'

'You mean go to the Planning Committee and get them to reverse their decision?'

'Is it impossible?'

'Damn' near.'

Jock stood then, smiling again.

'In that case we can't ask you to do it, can we? Pity. We'd be grateful though, if you would raise the matter, and use your influence where you can.'

Jock was undoubtedly a diplomatist, he knew when to cut out the talk. Hamish walked with the young man down the echoing hall and Jock asked how the hens were doing.

'Oh, they keep laying, you know. Mind you, the bottom has fallen out of the market. It's scarcely economic any more.'

'I knew there was something else,' Jock said. 'Market, of course. You play them sometimes, don't you?'

'Eh?'

'Stocks.'

'Don't talk about it, my boy. I'm the Jonah in any company. When

I own a sizeable block of anything the chairman has to resign because there's no annual dividend to declare.'

Jock laughed.

'Everyone's luck must turn, sir. Father actually mentioned this; he thought you might be interested. Have you heard of Blaehill Trust?'

'Never.'

'It's hush-hush still up to a point. A sort of London takeover bid in the offing, more than that, a practical cert. Father's putting a lot in. The shares are nine and eleven or thereabouts. They could be twenty-five in a month.'

'Nonsense!'

'Oh, no it's not, sir. It's one of those things that happen every now and then. You have to be on the inside to know what's coming. Father's pretty well informed sometimes. He hasn't made all his money out of Scotsroofs, you know. Of course your broker won't think much of Blaehill, it isn't the kind of thing that will have reached a broker yet. We just thought you might be interested. Good night, sir. And do anything you can for us about that field.'

Hamish only realized he had been offered a bribe when the door was shut behind Jock. That was all it was, perfectly simple, a chance to double what money he could scrape together, and do that in a very short time. If old Will was plunging it wouldn't be much of a gamble, either.

Hamish turned then and went slowly down the hall, and through the baize door, to his hens. In the back courtyard he heard the rumble of thunder and looked up to see solid black cloud moving swiftly from behind the sudden, sharp peak of Corrie Brae. The first spatter of rain reached him as he opened a shed door.

I2

THE rain was almost solid, belabouring the old tiles and the newer slates and the zinc of outhouses. It swept down the hilly streets, cleansing, the gutters turned into burns, the drains frothing. Cars hissed across intersections and people ran for shelter. The manager of the Odeon switched on the canopy lights and *Room at the Top* glowed out a message of refuge.

Tomelli, the naturalized Scot from Turin, came to the door of his fish and chip shop and shouted to a fugitive on a bicycle.

'Good, good, we need, eh? My water-tank all empty, sure.'

He laughed, welcoming the rain, looking up into it, getting it on his face and thin hair. He had a big garden and went for prizes at the Horticultural, mostly for turnips. He was prouder of his turnips than his celebrated ice-cream which he had taken to watering a little during the height of the season.

In the half-open doorway to the chemist's house above his shop Elsie Garr waited. She hadn't been asked into the little sitting-room and she didn't sit on the one chair beside the coatrack. She stood hearing the faint clink of bottles from the dispensing room looking at the rain which was sweeping the streets of her adversaries, leaving only the glistening asphalt and the now darkened frontages of buildings.

'Here you are then,' the chemist said suddenly.

He was a little man, bald and plump, refusing to retire, his wife dead, his children grown up, while he spent his days selling cosmetics and aspirins to a generation that wasn't near him at all. He looked at Elsie from a kind of neutrality of age, from pale eyes, knowing about her, but not caring.

'Two shillings,' he said.

She paid him, and smiled. The smile made him uneasy.

'How . . . ah . . . is your father?'

'Just about the same.'

'Well, we've all got to meet it, eh?'

'That's right. Thank you, Mr. Macpherson.'

'Just a minute. You've . . . no coat. I could . . . lend you an umbrella.'

The hall light he had put on glinted on his glasses. They were thick-lensed, making you wonder if he could read the prescriptions from doctors, but he probably knew them all by heart anyway. Elsie felt from the old man then a kind of stirring of interest in her, at which he was in a way protesting, because he didn't want to be interested.

She was sensitive to these slight changes in attitude towards her that were occurring in places, catching her sometimes by surprise, as she was surprised now. Macpherson was known to be a dour man, who refused to sell contraceptives, a great inconvenience in the town, for it meant a bus journey to Perth.

'Something on your head,' the chemist said. 'A scarf?'

'It's only just round the corner. I'll run.'

'Here . . . just a minute, what about baby foods, eh? Strained. I've got 'em in tins. For your father. Digestible. He might take to them.'

'Oh, I never thought.'

'Got to mash everything up anyway, haven't you? All done for you. Glucose, what about glucose?'

'I'm giving it to him.'

'Hang on.'

In a moment Macpherson was back, with three small tins.

'Don't sell 'em much,' he said. 'Keeping them for myself. Need 'em soon.'

He smiled then. His dentures were wobbly.

'It's very kind of you to think of it, Mr. Macpherson. How much?'

'Och, away. Go on, now. Run. I want to shut the door. The rain drives in.'

The door slammed behind her, even while Elsie was still standing under the shelter of the lintel, clutching the packaged prescriptions and the tins. She took a deep breath, like someone about to plunge into a pool, and ran.

There was a car in front of Tomelli's, then the sound of the juke-box roaring out, but cut off quickly. Elsie looked up too late. Someone caught her arm to keep her from falling, but a tin slipped from her hand.

'Sorry,' she said, her apology part of the quick furtiveness she still took with her on expeditions into the town. The tin rolled away into the gutter, caught by the tyre of the car. She bent for it.

'Let me,' a man said.

They straightened together, the tin in his hand. It was Jock. Elsie

pulled the package and the other tins hard in against her body.

'Hello,' he said.

In the light from Tomelli's she could see his face, set-looking under the brim of a soft felt, eyes on hers. The rain made her lower her eyelids.

This meeting had to happen, she'd known that, and been wary of it, expecting to see him suddenly coming out of the post office or from a door in the row of shops. In her mind there had been this distance, something to count on, giving her a chance to turn away. Now she was slack from a kind of shock, a sense of being exposed, that he had caught her with no time for defences.

'I'll take the tin,' she said.

He held it out and she looked at his fingers around it, square-ended fingers with the nails cut straight across. From his hands came the stabbing intimacy of that moment, not the look in his eyes, not even the sense of his making no move at all, just watching her. It was from his hands that she wanted to run.

'I'll take the tin.'

Their fingers touched. She didn't look at him, taking it, the rain was her excuse for hurrying, for keeping her head down along the short stretch of pavement to where her lane offered shelter.

She went into it and down past the house that stuck out to a light burning in a dormer window, taking out the big key and using it, and then standing in the hall with the sudden night shut out behind her. She brought a hand up to her hair and felt it wet. She went into the kitchen, putting the things she had brought carefully on the side-board, and from a rail near the sink took a towel and began to rub her hair.

It was a moment or two before she realized the wet on her cheeks wasn't from her hair. She sat down holding the towel taut between her hands across her knees, shaking suddenly, her breath caught by it.

Her feeling was like anger. That was what it was, she could identify it, anger at intrusion, at the tearing of paper defences so carefully built up over the weeks and months. It was anger, too, at feeling thrust on her from somewhere outside, feeling unwanted and never sought. She'd fought to put it away and been fool enough to think she had.

She didn't like Jock. How could she like him? Even in London sometimes it had been like taking love from an enemy, in a kind of

despair because the thing your body cried and shook for had no lasting value to him. In a way she had known it all along, even when he was coming to her as though he spent the day thinking about the moment when he could do that. Instead the truth was that Jock set an alarm in his mind and when it went off it was time for his woman of the moment.

She'd been that, just that. Her degradation had been in the going on, resisting the truth, not able to muster the strength to face it. There was nothing in this love to build on and there never had been and there never could be. And yet it held her, and no escape was real, only an act in the mind. The plain fact was that she hadn't gone any distance at all along the road of being free of him.

It was a kind of punishment, maybe, for an immunity held so long, a girl in a hard game making her way, watching herself, climbing up, using her head all the time, and sometimes her body, too, when that became important. It had been important for a while with her agent, and the bookings had started to come right. Everything was starting to come right until that night after the hotel cabaret when Jock had come into her dressing-room, the man from her own town. The perfect entrance cue that, the old home town just on the edge of the Highlands, the man doing well and the girl from the house with no bathtub not doing so badly either, accepting the challenge of his laughter, quite confident.

Confident. God!

It hadn't lasted long, that confidence from being well up and going further, it hadn't been much protection. Jock had walked in and everything began to go wrong, so slowly at first you pretended you didn't notice, though you knew.

Yes, that was the humiliation, you had always known, and realizing it after had been worse than the trial, worse than the curious eyes day in and day out, knowing that what you'd had was nothing, but you were empty from the lack of it.

She had often wanted to hate him during those days, and sometimes managed it, but it had done nothing for her. When you have been exposed, naked and pried at, you have to set about making a new covering for your living. Nothing you had before serves, and if you want to be whole again you don't use anything that touched you earlier. Jock had gone off, and it was as well because he was part of the old, to be put aside.

But she couldn't. She had never been able to do this. It was why she was sitting now shaking, with the towel taut across her knees.

If this was love it was hideous. You should be able to kill it. The truth would serve some maybe, but not her, because she'd had it with her always. She couldn't get out that way, by seeing Jock as he was, because she always had. He was no part of her, no part, and yet the ache for him was again in her bones. His hands!

Elsie got up and went to the sink. She took a comb and used it on her hair, arm moving slowly, eyes staring into those eyes in the mirror. She was mocked by her face, ashamed of what she saw in it, the bitterness of that shame uncurling in her. She knew with a kind of horror that under his hands she came to life.

Her hair was tidy but her face, softened and puffy from tears, angered her. She ran cold water from the tap, used the sink soap, and then leaning forward with her opened handbag beside her, put on make-up, more than she had worn in Kilrudderie and not the pale lipstick. There was a discipline in making yourself fit to be seen, it was a period to senseless weeping.

The knock on the front door came almost at the moment Elsie was finished and she turned with the half-surprise of a woman caught ready.

It was John McCall, holding a dripping and very large umbrella over himself.

'I hope I'm not disturbing you? I was down seeing old Mrs. Martin and I thought I'd pop in for a minute.'

She said something about her father having lain all day without moving, at least when she had been with him.

'I don't think I'll go up, Elsie. It's you I want to see.'

She might have been curious, if it had been this morning. Now she just looked at him and led the way into the kitchen. John McCall removed his topcoat carefully, and put it over a chair.

'I hope it doesn't drip,' he said. He sat down without being asked, almost at ease, as though there was enough between them already to warrant this. 'I'm really here on behalf of the Refugee Concert Committee. You've probably seen the preliminary notices. We're trying to make it a big thing, with all the best talent.'

Elsie knew that she should be putting the kettle on, but she didn't. Instead she took a cigarette from the packet and lit it.

'We've got some rather good people, actually. There's Joan Harrington, the singer, from Perth. And a piper from Pitlochry. I thought we might use the real talent in our midst. That is, Elsie Garr.'

She looked at him unbelieving, not doubting any more his good intent, but suddenly astonished to find him so deficient in sense.

'I think I know what you're going to say, Elsie, and I wonder if you'd let *me* say something first? I feel you have a right now to make a claim on this town. I'd like to see you get up on that platform and sing for us. A popular song if you like, something you know well.'

Elsie sat down. The Minister was not a fool. His motive in suggesting this must be, to his mind, for her good. And yet he wanted her to go on a platform where hundreds of Kilrudderic citizens, packed into a hall, could all have a good squint at her at once. It would be a splendid kind of defiance, perhaps, to say yes. But she didn't want to defy them.

'I can't believe that you really mean to give up your singing for good.'

Was that really it? Her Art? She wanted to laugh. She thought suddenly, and with a kind of relief, of Harry at the piano, cigarette drooping, saying: 'Remember, kid, the female voice don't do anything for the male unless it sounds like it started off well below the belly button.'

'Elsie, I know you'll think this is absurd of me, and that I'm plunging into something. But . . . you know what gave me the idea? Tomelli's have a record of yours in that juke-box thing of theirs. They're putting in money and pressing the button to hear your voice right here in Kilrudderie.'

Elsie smiled.

'Maybe I'll still collect some royalties,' she said.

'I hope so. I'm sorry I can't tell you what the record Tomelli has is called.'

She looked at him. She felt suddenly very much older than the Minister who had to go around carrying good works in an invisible suitcase. She knew the disc, certain that it could only be the last one she had pressed, and it was called . . . 'I Got Love Right Here'. She remembered making it, not liking the number much, with one of those arty combos behind her, mostly off-beat big string thumping and a clarinet with asthma. It wasn't her line at all. Her line was below the navel wailing for older boys just after the near raw steaks of their

late suppers. That and guest appearances on TV with one of those long-lasting comics whose comedy angles were about as much in need of manipulative surgery as their ageing faces.

You walked smiling towards the hot lights, wondering if little beads of sweat were working through the top layer of make-up. It was yesterday and should feel another life away, but it didn't, as though it could be tomorrow, too. But not the village hall, that couldn't be anything.

She shook her head.

'I'm sorry.'

'You're not thinking about your father?'

'Oh, no. I just couldn't do it.'

'You've done it before, Elsic.'

She smiled again.

'Yes, it was my school music-teacher who tied my hair-ribbon. You know what I dreamed of then, Mr. McCall? Getting a job with the Tartan Group. We used to hear them all the time on radio then. They went round all the small towns in Scotland.'

'They still do. They come here every winter.'

'And Dunoon in the summer! What I missed!'

'Why did you go to London?' he asked. 'I mean straight from here?'

'I wanted to get as far from home as I could without a passport.'

She threw her cigarette into the open fire of the range, wondering if she had hurt him with honesty. He stood up.

'A minister gets a lot of ideas, Elsic, only a few of them good ones. Perhaps this one was to help you begin to feel that you were home.'

'But I'm not home, Minister. I'm just here while I have to be. I shouldn't wonder but what they're saying I'm waiting for the old man's money. And I'll take it when I get it. I'll have earned it by then.'

'In other words, leave you alone?'

'I don't mean to be rude. Really I don't. You've been very kind. You were the first, still are in a way. I'm very grateful but I can't . . .'

'Would it be an ordeal to come to church?'

'Yes.'

He laughed.

'Well, you're not the only one there. No Refugee Concert. It's a pity, I'd have liked to have heard you sing.'

When he had gone, out into the rain, Elsie came back into the kitchen and sat down, feeling astonished. The Minister had come here willing to sponsor her, and to make it clear to the town that he was doing it. She was living half in hiding and he wanted to end that with one gesture, a girl who had shot a man in London, getting up to sing to the local worthies in their best clothes. He had nerve. It wasn't the kind of courage that would be very healthy for a minister, either. He bothered because he was driven, by his message or whatever it was, even to the point of taking wild gambles. She was certain that he couldn't yet have suggested her appearance to the concert committee, but had been willing to put her acceptance before them as something they had to swallow. He would have made them swallow it, going to war if he had to. But maybe, walking back now to the manse in the wet, he was just a little relieved in his heart.

The visit had done something for her, it had pushed Jock away, leaving her free again, back with the routine. It was time to see to her father, and then she would make up her bed for the night on the horsehair sofa under the window. She had given up the room that had once been hers, not for any emotional reasons, the bed was too painful. The sofa at least offered a uniform firmness and though she left the door open at night, sleeping in the kitchen gave her a slight feeling of escape, of being down here in her own world which, however confined, had a certain cosiness. She could lie on the sofa and watch the last telly programme, rising drowsily with God Save the Queen to switch off the set.

Her evening duties with the old man took about half an hour. She came down from them without that earlier quivering in her flesh, just tired, ready to be by herself. He would sleep now, if he slept, and he was certainly like a good baby, rarely making a fuss at night. Or if he made it she didn't hear him. Sleep had always been something she could just reach out and take, even in the worst days.

For supper she made herself an omelet, watching Richard Dimbleby while she chewed. Tonight it was China, the new order, peasants building dams, a dragon procession in the streets, a firm-faced leader in a cotton pyjama top shouting out words that somehow sounded like the ideographs on a banner, words with tone changes that might have been suggested musically by an extra added curl with a brush stroke. The New China didn't look very appetizing, with people shuffling along singing marching songs. One of the songs was a possible, though,

it could have been adapted to a small combo, with the girl singer doing the usual sex exercises in front of a mike stick. Hotted up in Hong Kong, and passed on to the West it could have been another 'Rose, Rose, I Love You,' a brief flickering up with the top ten. Then Mr. Dimbleby switched off China and turned to housing in the Midlands. Elsie's slight professional interest curled up and slept again.

At ten she was ready for the couch, but paid a last visit to her father before going to it. She always put out his light at night now and sometimes thought of those eyes open in the dark, but not really troubled by this thought. She was certain that in some way, with what was left of his brain, the old man went on journeys, travelling all the time, perhaps even lying there living the life he had long denied himself. There might well be at the end, when we are out of life but not gone from it, this opportunity for exploration, the drawers and storage cupboards of past experience left open, the chance to rummage amongst them, freed from the disciplines of will or timidity. She was certain, at any rate, that he didn't need pity and she didn't waste it.

Elsie saw, coming through the kitchen door, that the range fire was almost out. She would leave it and clean the flues in the morning. She turned her head and saw Jock sitting in the second chair that had once been her mother's.

Without realizing quite what she was doing she closed the kitchen door and leaned back against it. It was a small chair, but even in it Jock didn't look very big. He wasn't smiling.

'I came in the back way. You hadn't locked it.'

She swore at him, a sudden upsurge of words not used before, as though anger dug for them and flung them out. And then she saw, incredibly, that he was trembling, sitting there with his hands touching.

'My God! You think you can just walk in still?'

'I tried it.'

'Well, you're a fool! Get out of here! Get to hell out!'

He lifted his head. The light in here was glaring; her father had liked strong lights. She saw the pinched look in his face, as though somehow the skin was drawn tight against his teeth and the bones that held them.

'Elsie, listen to me a minute.'

'What have I to listen to? Your excuses? Oh, my God! You walk

in here. What do you expect to find? Do you think I came back here on the chance you'd do this one night?

'No.'

'Thanks for that. Thanks very much. Now get out. I'll let you out the front way. So they can see in this town I'm kicking you out. They probably watched you sneaking in the back.'

'No one saw me.'

'Oh. So it's all right for us? No one will know, is that it? You can manage things even in Kilrudderie?'

'Elsie, stop this!'

'Why? Those words just now. It's what I feel. I'm glad to get rid of them. I think I've been wanting to for a long time. Maybe I'm glad you came to let me do that.'

'Do you think it was easy for me to go away?'

She stared at him. Then she laughed.

'Yes, Jock, I think it was easy for you. You went down to London airport and got on a night plane for America. Long ago I gave up blaming you for that. I only blamed myself for damfool love. For sick damfool love!'

'Why don't you cry?' he asked.

Slowly Elsie drew in her breath.

'I'm empty. Of you and everything else. Get out!'

'Not of me.'

Her hands tightened by her sides. She came a little into the room, nearer to him. She shouted at him.

'I'm free of you!'

He was out of his chair, holding her wrists, stretching out her arms, their bodies almost touching. She brought down her hands sharply, breaking his hold on one of them, swinging away.

'Damn you! Damn you!'

He caught her to him, hard, his lips on hers, Elsie's jaw clenched. They swung around, back against a chest of drawers, Jock pushing her a'inst it. She put her free hand backwards, feeling for something, anything, to hit him with it. Something toppled and crashed. Her father's medicine.

He had her free hand again, holding it for a moment. Then with her body hard against the chest of drawers, the knobs of it prodding into her back, his hands were on her cheeks, holding her head still. For only a moment her mouth was free.

'No! No!'

She was crying, as he had told her to. And that was the first weakness, the beginning of horror, of defeat. She knew its certainty now, that there was still no strength in her, nothing to fight with. He felt the change. He let her hands go, his head back, watching her, only his body holding hers.

'That's better. That's better, my love.'

'I'm not your love!'

'You're not empty of me, Elsie.'

'Jock, go away. Please go away. Jock, don't. . . .'

'It hurt me, too. Having to go off.'

'Oh, stop! What do you know about it? What do you know?'

'This.'

He kissed her again, this time to no resistance, to her lips parting, to the invasion, the probing tongue, the old eclipse of sense and bitterness. With wet lips on her cheeks he said her name, softly, over and over.

There was no way out then. Even the thought of escape had dulled. At one point, in his arms, if she had held out he would have left her. She knew that. If she had kept on wanting to be free of him he would have gone.

She couldn't want it. Her sick damfool love. The mortal pain that couldn't be covered, even dosed with hate. The emptiness.

'It's been long,' Jock said. 'Long, long.'

He stood back from her suddenly, sure now, smiling for the first time. Elsie looked into his eyes, and then went to the sofa, standing by it to slip out of her dressing-gown and nightdress. It seemed to her, lying there waiting, that there was time for shame again, that a kind of horror at her defeat, at the ease of it for him, was creeping back.

Then he came to stand over her, looking down. He shivered. She wanted to hold up her arms to him, but she didn't move, she lay rigid until he bent and kissed her, only touching her lips, and gently. Then his hands came on to her body, her stomach, up under her breasts.

'Empty of me, eh? Not any longer, Elsie.'

Not any longer! It was a cry in her arched, welcoming body.

The tenderness came too, when he lay against her, his breathing on her neck, his hands and body still. The tenderness had always come

like that, sometimes denied by her mind, as a kind of betrayal of herself. But with him there she felt again the man alone, the man who had said that it hurt him to go off, her feeling trying to make a truth of this, and managing. He was alone without her, she was sure of it.

She was sure now that what she gave him wasn't found easily, that the depth of her pain reached him.

She didn't try to look at him. She knew his face, his head, she could have taken clay and modelled it, or a pencil and drawn it. She knew his eyes, closed or open, the darkness in them or the dark lashes over them. He hadn't shaved again before coming to her, he hadn't bothered. She smiled.

In America he had been alone, all the time, just as she was. How could she have doubted that? He had come to her here in this little town because there was no other way out of his loneliness, perhaps not wanting to come. It was something laid on them, their love, something they had to accept.

Supposing he had believed those things said about her? He could have stayed away because of them, until he couldn't any more. He might have come here still believing in them, angry at his weakness as she had been angry at hers.

'Jock . . . ?'

'Mm.'

'You've never asked me. I was waiting for you to write. I'd have written you. I'd have told you about what happened.'

'You mean London?'

'Yes. Oh, darling, there wasn't anything behind it. I deserved to be acquitted. That boy was only a stage-door johnny to me. That's all!'

'Don't talk about it.'

'But I want you to know! He had a history of mental disorder. He was quite mad that night. I let him in, yes. But I never thought. When he produced the gun I tried to laugh him out of it. Latin dramatics, that's what I thought it was. Then I began to realize this wasn't just play acting. . . .'

Jock caught her face in one hand, his fingers hard against her jaw on both sides.

'I don't want to hear about it!'

He kissed her. He began to stir again, saying her name, a little incantation of her name, long used, long effective. His hands moved on her

At two by the chiming mantel clock Jock got up and dressed in a room still glaring with light. She watched him, not moving, aching with sudden tire, but hating his going, knowing the feeling of being safe was only real when she could touch him. He was careful about his dressing, almost as though he was going out into the late London streets, able to hail a taxi. He stood at the sink, looking in the dark little mirror to adjust his tie, remote from her again, suddenly so far away that she wanted to cry out to him to come back.

Then he turned and smiled, crossing quickly, pulling a cover over her.

'My sweet. I'll be back tomorrow. Tonight. . . .'

'Jock, it isn't safe.'

'I'll make it safe. Late. Don't worry, I'll watch. Sleep now. Sorry it has to be alone.'

'It always has been,' she said, her arms around his neck.

He took them gently away.

'I know. Got a key for me? To the back door? I'll need that, I can't fix times.'

'Oh, Jock. . . . All right. It's in that dish on the mantelpiece.'

With the key in his hand he looked at her again.

'Want me to put out the light?'

She shook her head.

'Don't pad around in your bare feet, Elsie. There's a lot of broken glass.'

He went so quietly that she didn't hear him in the little scullery or the back door closing. For a moment Elsic lay on, then she put her legs on the floor, finding slippers. She got into the nightdress and dressing-gown, feeling bruised, and glad of it.

The glass certainly was a mess. She found a dust pan and swept it up, opening the range ash door. She turned, wondering about the light shining through window curtains, perhaps noticed. It didn't matter. She could work up no small panics about Kilrudderie. It didn't belong to her at all, or she to it.—They were just using the place, Jock and she.

Elsie was lighting a cigarette when she realized how hungry she was. She took a banana and ate it slowly, smoking at the same time, standing by the little chair in which she had seen him sitting when she came in, her fingers touching it. She hadn't left this room since, a long time, a great journey in feeling.

If anyone had noticed a light on they might as well see plenty. She went into the hall and switched that one on, climbing the stairs, going to her father, something she had never done before during the night. The upper light went on, too. She didn't pause outside the bedroom, her hand feeling round the open door, clicking down the switch.

Archie Garr wasn't neatly centred in the bed any more. He lay on his side, half out from under the covers, almost as though he had been going to get up, one arm hanging down, fingers curved inward. He was staring at her, but his eyes didn't move. She knew he was dead.

Suddenly . . . the sound coming before conscious terror . . . she screamed.

It pleased Jock to find the moon out, almost a full moon, the rain clouds torn from it by wind, the late night sky alive, patches of solid blackness left still, but even these breaking up, ragged caverns torn in them, star-spattered. A white light was on the hills and over the valley as he climbed away from the old town, into streets grown genteel and reserved with their gardens and curtained windows. The pavements and the road, still wet, glistened. It was cool, but not cold, almost summer in a place where the summers never got too hot.

It was home, and he knew that his ideas of New York, when they came off, would never exclude this, that he would always want back for part of each year, not to his father's house if the old man still lived, but to one of his own which he would keep. There were a lot of things he wanted to keep, that he wasn't casting off. There might even be, for a long time, Elsie Garr down in the old town, waiting for his certain returns to this place.

It might take a little persuasion to make her accept that role, but she would in the end. What they had could last for years, particularly if it was rationed.

He smiled.

Footsteps came towards him down the hill, boots clicking, surprising at this hour. His own shoes, crêped, were silent and for a moment he had the impulse to seek shadow, to keep in it until the boots came past. But he walked on, and the boots became a shape, blurred by hedges, then appearing suddenly in a patch of moonlight.

It was a policeman.

'Looking for burglars?' Jock asked. 'Is it Roberts?'

The man stopped. They looked at each other, Jock at a face still shaded by a peaked cap.

'No, I'm Harris, Mr. Innis. I'm new here you might say. Three months.'

'But you know me?'

'Och, yes. It's a fine night, turned out.'

'Marvellous. I'd no cigarettes. I decided to take a walk in it to a machine. Didn't know you had this kind of late duty in Kilrudderie.'

The man laughed.

'There's folk thinks the policemen sleep here. But we don't. Not all the time.'

It was the kind of small town occasion Jock liked, the social opportunity seized at any hour, the night able to wait as well as the day. There was always time for these pauses, in any road, anywhere.

'Liking it here?' Jock asked. 'Where were you before?'

'I'm on loan from Fife.'

'A bit of a change. But we're quieter, I expect. Law-abiding town, don't you think?'

'Aye, you could say that. It's not a bad wee town this.'

'But you'll still have your problems?'

'We do. Still, they're the kind a policeman disnae mind somehow. You might say we was trained for them. There's things happening these days that sort of take the wind out of you. But not here. No, no. It's not a bad wee place. I'll say this for Kilrudderie, it's got maist things, but nae buggery. Not that I've seen, onyway. And what I've seen some places, you wouldn't credit it! Gangs of wee boys of fourteen and fifteen running blackmail rackets. It's a fact. Not Glasgow . . . Fife. They should ha'e kept the birch. I don't hold with these psychiatrists. The fines is nae good, either. It disnae come oot o' their own skins, ye ken.'

Walking on up the hill Jock suddenly saw in his mind a sign set at the approaches to the town, studded to glow in car headlamps.

Welcome to Kilrudderie
Where there's nae buggery.

He began to laugh, the sound caught in the wind, blown over the town. Far below him the clicking of the policeman's feet stopped.

HAMISH lay beside his wife in a bed which was far too soft for his liking. His own was made up of three army 'biscuits' on an iron frame, so hard that if you whacked them you hurt your hand. It wasn't any regime of asceticism he had set himself, just habit. On this mattress, though it was wide enough, he couldn't sleep. He was puffed and ballooned up into wakefulness and somehow his feet went on feeling higher than his head. But Hester was asleep now, breathing in that way which suggested she might snore in a few moments, though she never did.

For a long time they had talked, all around themselves, about his hens, and her Women's Institute, and Colin and Sheina, but never about holidays, or paint, or the pain in her side that he had first become aware of nearly six months ago, catching her bent over with it, leaning with one hand on the kitchen table.

It didn't surprise him that in marriage the list of taboos not to be mentioned grew longer; they covered the disappointments that were inherent in sharing life, and these mounted, it was inevitable that they should. He accepted the responsibility for the ones which stemmed from him, knowing that they were the bulk of the list, for somehow from that moment of early retiral which the Army demanded he had never come quite to grips with the new reality, making a sensible pattern of it. He had made all the surface gestures, the hens for pin money, public office for a semblance of continuing authority, but this house which they had so often talked about living in for good, and with peace, had become a kind of continuous mental liability to them both. For him there was the compensation of the echoes he could still hear in the place, for the angle of garden which had been where his mother put her chair. His father's voice still boomed out sometimes, a burly man coming between box hedges from a row with the second gardener. Hamish remembered the big coming-out party for his sister, with Japanese lanterns on the lawn and a hired orchestra. She now wrote brief, arid letters from Kenya where she had endured the Mau Mau time on a lonely estate, to have her husband die, worn out, at the end of it. Lettie was in Nairobi now, in a flat, savage on the

British betrayal of the whites in Africa. Once she had flown home and talked about Rosemount as this old barn, and it had hurt him, because unexpected.

He had the feeling sometimes that he had martyred Hester for a house, and their last years with it. He was able to think about leaving the place, and did on occasion, but always the alternatives seemed a curious blank. It would mean leaving the town, and where else was there but the place you knew? All his time in the Army, even India, had been rooted here, to this firm base, and in those days there had been a positive pleasure in the necessary letters to his agent to get on with painting the greenhouses, or thinning out the wind-threatened trees. It was the reality of the dream achieved which burdened him, and Hester.

It was no money, of course. The empty rooms would have been tolerable if on occasion they were used, with fires lit, and women coming down the wide stair for dinner at the huge polished table. No money for that. Hens had been going to provide it, everything worked out, his pension, his share income and hens. A new car every third year, and one or two evenings of people every week. Eggs then had been nine and sometimes ten shillings a dozen. Too many people had shared this idea of comfortable security, and the wholesale price had sunk to an on-season three shillings a dozen. Even less for the peak production period. Only a few years ago customers had come up from Kildrudderie to buy their eggs for putting down at a bottom price of about seven shillings. Now nobody put down eggs at all, the place was flooded with cheap Danish ones, and that would get worse with this new Outer Seven agreement or whatever it was called.

Money. Even a few thousands they could put to one side and say . . . 'This is for play.' The idea of play of any sort was comic, almost grotesque. The Doctor with his helpful suggestion of Portugal! Hill was one of the new havcs, not dependent any more on patients paying their bills, but getting his state handout on a *per capita* basis. It was a lot of nonsense about the professional classes suffering under the present order, those doctors and dentists and even the continually howling teachers. For all of them the standard was rising, quicker certainly for the man who could pull teeth than for the one who herded children into the two classes of sheep and goats at the age of eleven, but all going up. The people who were going down were the fools who stood alone, who made an outmoded fetish of independence

when they ought to be getting a foothold on one of the many band-wagons. The sensible man of the sixties lived in a Council house with his rent subsidized by the state, got his medicine free and fat allowances for applied procreation, while he spent his total income on his car and football pools and then, when getting a little older and troubled by the future at all, simply adding his voice to the general bellow for increased old age pensions.

It sometimes seemed to Hamish that if the Russians moved into Britain there wasn't much they'd have to add to the social revolution after they had shot the retail millionaires and substituted commissars.

Money. It was a kind of hell having had enough for the bulk of one's life, and then to feel the noose tightening, to be strangled out of a modest heritage.

Moonlight was coming in the window, reaching across the threadbare handwoven carpet to the flounced bed in the room which Hester had once said she was preparing to use to the end of her days. It was a big moon, and faintly coloured as it might have been in Portugal, almost with a hint of warmth about it.

He turned his head and looked at his wife, suddenly seeing her as an old woman, and frightened by that, as though she had now reached the years when, slack with sleep, her face told the truth that a brisk day-time tautening could still cover. She was near the sixties and he was in them, and all that was left was a kind of desperate scheming for Colin, to adapt him for life in an uprooted society.

Money. Even those suburbanites down the hill had it, sleeping in their neatly designed bungalows which were the reward for faithful service to Middle East oil companies or built with capital snatched hastily from one of the lost limbs of Empire. They had enough for their time, for new cars with full petrol tanks, for golf and trips to Paris and for endless sessions of bridge with a couple of gin breaks in between rubbers. The welfare state wouldn't turn their houses into remand homes, they were too small, modest in the manner which lets you survive unnoticed against change.

The trouble with Rosemount was that it didn't have enough bedrooms to make what would be classified as an economic unit in remand homes, and there was a distinct shortage of those large cupboards which could be converted so that delinquent boys could have private baths.

He looked at Hester again and knew that his sudden bitterness came from her old face, and his shame.

Money. There was a way he could get it. He had only to go down to his banker tomorrow, to sit in the manager's private room and instruct him to sell that flatulent West Indian oil, that sagging tobacco, the depressed South African gold, rubber that was being ousted by synthetics, and then in their place to buy Blaehill Trust, being well organized by a neat little group of boys in the know.

Hamish had no doubt that, even with his past luck, Blaehill would double itself, just as Will Innis said it would. If he could realize, by scraping the barrel, six thousand pounds, he would have twelve or more in a couple of months. And the price? A little nepotism, that was all, against all the principles to which he had held for so long and which had served him so ill. He was out of tune with the times in allowing this to baulk him, to place any bar across the road to his temporal progress.

All he had to do was take a deep breath and plunge in. Also, he had to say nothing to Hester.

How pleasantly the bribe had been sugar-coated. There was nothing at all to stop him using the information received and taking no steps to return the favour. In this the Innises, father and son, were relying on some residual rump of a soldier's honour functioning to their advantage. They knew perfectly well that he wouldn't take the prize without trying to earn it, or Jock knew.

Bloody little man with his dark eyes and his quick smile and his way with the girls.

Very quietly Hamish got out of the bed, but the thing heaved about, and Hester moaned gently, as though in protest. He saw her move her hand up into the pillow, sliding it under her cheek, and remembered seeing her doing that on a thousand other nights, and when they were young, and their bodies hadn't this withered leaness. She had given him great pleasure once, his wife, and oddly perhaps, since he had married her, his only woman. You could say of Colin that he had been born from love, and sometimes you had the feeling you could spot the people who had come into the world like that, legally or otherwise, from a flaming love between the two who had made them. These didn't make up the bulk of the population by any means.

At the window he stood looking out, over the grounds where the

trees had been in his father's day, and for long enough in his, but where now the once screened town seemed to be reaching up at him from its sodium-glare complacency. A speculative builder might like this as a site for more houses, if the flow of the prosperous retired bent on rose culture wasn't running out. Jock Innis might buy the place eventually, after it had been on the market for a long time with no takers, tearing down an outmoded house, and plastering over dead gardens with those highly saleable pressed board abominations.

If he bought Blaehill Trust he could perhaps stave that off for a while, maybe even until Colin's time. Suddenly he shivered.

Mr. Hamilton, the banker, always reminded Hamish of an undertaker, or rather a mortician, dignified, with the same reserved awe towards money that the other shows towards death. He was a Border man, and probably half English, twenty years in Kilmallock, the trusted confidant of fifty comfortably off old ladies. He was short, bald and tubby, with a gentle smile for a falling market, and no elation for a rising one. He had been brought up in a generation which had invariably recommended Consols and, disillusioned in this, approached contemporary speculation with the caution of a timid bather at the deep end of a pool. He didn't like plunges. He didn't really like buying for people at all and his eyes had a curious shadowing, as though responsibility had washed all laughter out of them, and he woke often in the night to contemplate with dismay his own decisions on behalf of others. None the less he did a lot of the buying and selling for Kilmallock and the rich farmers round about. The nearest broker was Glasgow, and long distance calls added to the percentage charges. Also, he liked that accumulation of percentages for himself, and tidied away the profits from this side-line into three-and-a-half-per-cent tax-paid Building Societies which he regarded as one of the last remaining bulwarks against creeping Socialism under a Tory government. If enough people went on struggling to own their own houses this meant a solid body of taxpayers still left to support the quivering structure of the national economy.

Mr. Hamilton's face now wore a rarely used expression of total dismay. One plump hand, with pale, rather feminine looking nails, resting on a file which was labelled 'Colonel Fairway-Campbell's Portfolio'. His voice had thinned to almost a squeak of protest.

'But surely, Colonel, you can't contemplate selling *all* of these?'

'Every damn' one,' Hamish said.

He looked at the carpet and not the banker. Hamish hadn't quite slipped into the manner he intended to use, of the brusque, decisive military type, raised on Kipling.

If you can make one heap of all your winnings,
And risk it on one turn of pitch-and-toss,
And lose, and start again at your beginnings. . . .

It was perhaps as well to leave Kipling out of this. Blachill Trust couldn't possibly lose.

'Every one,' Hamish said again, too loud.

'But, Colonel, that leaves practically nothing except your Government Securities.'

'Don't talk about my Government Securities!'

'Colonel, I must point out that your list isn't in a good condition for selling. General market conditions are certainly fair, but I'm afraid the general trend hasn't reached to your holdings.'

'When the hell has the general trend ever done that?'

Hamish was better pleased with the sound of his own voice now. He was able to look at Hamilton, seeing only a little man who spent a large part of his life grubbing down columns of the *Financial Times*, and the *Investors' Chronicle*, and the *Stockmarket Gazette*, to say nothing of the half-dozen newsletters which offered inside certs for a modest subscription of ten guineas per annum.

'I'm selling the whole list, Hamilton. At whatever price I can get. What would you make it, about six thousand?'

'Between five and six I should say, at a rough guess.'

'I paid nearly seven for that damn' stuff.'

'There has been a certain deterioration in recent years in the fields of your choice, Colonel. You will remember that I advised you strongly against certain courses of action.'

'I remember.'

'On the whole, of course, the interest position has been satisfactory. I might even say that taking the long view your holdings are in the main sound enough. . . .'

'Sell 'em!'

'I know this is none of my business, Colonel, but what precisely are you proposing to do with your capital acquired in this way?'

'Buy Blachill Trust. With every penny.'

'Blaehill . . . ? Oh, dear!'

Hamish jerked up his head.

'What's the matter? Heard anything against 'em?'

'Speculative, Colonel! Oh, highly speculative!'

'That's what I want. A gamble. I'm tired of jogging along.'

'But the bottom could fall out of Blaehill! It isn't a stock that has any solid coherence as yet.'

'Quite. The idea is that I get in before it coheres.'

How did the verse go on?

And lose, and start again at your beginnings

And never breathe a word about your loss.

Kipling's man couldn't have had much in the way of overheads, and probably no wife and family. And how could he never breathe a word about his loss since Hester would have to know? Hamish came then suddenly to one of his few literary judgments, the fellow was a damn' bad poet.

One of Hamilton's hands smacked the black file.

'Colonel, I cannot recommend this policy. I cannot support you in this course of action.'

'You mean you won't sell and buy for me?'

Hamilton was taken aback. He was emphatic in this manner but seldom, and quite unused to resistance when he used it.

'I can only carry out any instructions you give me, of course. But in this case I should do so with the greatest reluctance.'

'But you'll do it?'

'Only if you insist, Colonel.'

'I do. I think we can leave the matter. I was considering raising a mortgage on Rosemount and putting that in, too.'

For a moment Hamilton was speechless. He groped for words, winded.

'I doubt . . . I very much doubt . . . whether it would be easy to raise a mortgage on your property. Oh, very much doubt it, Colonel.'

Hamish smiled.

'In that case I'll take your advice and not try. Give me a ring when you've completed the deal, will you? No . . . On second thoughts don't phone. I'll pop in next week and do all necessary signing.'

'Very well,' Hamilton said, his organized day in emotional ruins about him.

He came to the door with Hamish, and across the mosaic floor of the public area, his plump face still tightened with dismay.

'Nice morning, isn't it?' Hamish said. 'Brisk.'

He walked out into the sunlight, going firmly along the pavement until the bank windows were hidden by the projection of the town hall. Then he took a deep breath, slightly light-headed, like the feeling that comes before a bout of malaria. Everything about him, the utterly familiar street, the people in it and the traffic, was removed and a little unreal. He walked along in his own dimension, as though in an older town, his roadway a few feet lower than the one in contemporary use. He had, almost, a sense of invisibility and was a shade surprised when a woman smiled at him and acclaimed the weather.

Then he saw a red phone box and knew what had to be done. He went into the thing, and the door bumped him into privacy.

Convene the Planning Committee. Right away. This afternoon if possible. Rout them out, they wouldn't resist him. No one was likely to smell a rat except the Socialist Mackson. He was the snag all right. But even he might be in a kind of torpor after lunch, and he was a big eater, shovelling it in and swilling beer. There was nothing the man liked better than eating at the expense of the county, and this would be an excuse to let him do that. They'd grumble, all of them, but would rally for meat and two veg. in the best hotel.

Hamish phoned Mackson first, and got his wife, a voice he knew without a face, a voice which always reached him against the squalling of children as a background.

'Oh, I'm sorry, Colonel. But my husband is in Glasgow for the day. No, I couldn't get in touch with him.'

Luck! He could get a quorum without Mackson all right, and the thing would go through. Maitland, the planning officer, wasn't much interested in land, only the buildings to be put on it later. Hamish knew how he would lecture them, on the economic needs of Kilrudderie threatened by factors they had overlooked in an earlier decision. County Councillors, only getting free lunches for their pains, were less inclined to dogmatic stands than paid professional politicians. They knew themselves liable to error, for so many of their decisions involved spending public money on matters in which they had very little practical experience indeed. It would only seem another of those times, while they were sleepy from steak and kidney pie and Edinburgh lager.

I4

MORAG MCFIE was shocked. No fire on for poor Archie, and him lying up there cold enough as it was. You needed a fire with a corpse, even in the summer.

'You'll hae to put it on, Elsie. I mean to say, there's folk comin' in. It'll never do no to hae a fire up there. They'll think you're mean, and him on his last day.'

'I just never thought about it,' Elsie said. 'There's never been a fire in that room. Not that I remember.'

'There has so. I put one on the night he was brought to his bed. And I'll do it again now. Mind you, I still think you should have had him in the kitchen.'

'No!'

'The undertaker does it real nice, up on trestles, ye ken. It makes it handier, too, for folk, not having the stair.'

'Morag, I don't want . . . ?'

'Och, well, I daresay it's your hoose noo. But I'll hae to hurry wi' that fire.'

She went out the back for sticks, to the little outhouse. Queer the way Elsic was taking things, right qucer. It wasn't as if there had been that much between them ever, but to see her you'd think she was at the end of things. Mind you, it would be a bit of a shock going up in the night and finding him. But she should have been expecting it.

The sticks didn't please Morag. She picked up a hatchet and began to reduce some in size. Fancy putting the coffin straight on the mattress. Who'd ever heard of that? It would be one of these London ideas, likely. There was too much of this easy way these days. Aye, and they whipped the remains out of the house quick enough, too, no sitting up by it, no decent respect.

Archie had ayc been one for the proper respects. Still, the town bell would toll for him as a bailie and there was something in that. He'd known for the better half of his days that he'd have the bell at his burying.

You couldn't say, either, that there was anything special-looking

about the Funeral Tea. Elsie should have got Patterson's, the baker, to do it, they aye brought in a nice piece of ham.

And the whisky! If she had it the bottles were tucked well out of sight. She couldn't have forgotten, surely?

'Elsie,' Morag said from the scullery door. 'You've got the whisky?'

Slowly Elsie turned. She had the look of grief on her all right, her eyes sunk into her head.

'What?'

'I said, you've got the whisky?'

'No. Oh, Morag, I'm not doing things right, I know. I . . . Will you help me? I meant to ask you earlier. Do you think people *will* be coming back here?'

'And why would they no be coming back? Wusnae Archie an Elder and a Bailie o' the toon? Aye, they'll be coming back.'

'Who?'

'Och, well, there'll be the Minister, and the other elders, and the beadle . . . he was a good friend of Archie, though not so much since he married again. I mean, his second wife couldn't do with people coming about the hoose. She disnae like a mess. Listen, hen, I can see you're upset. That sliced cold meat, you know, it's just not good enough. There's still time enough to get the baker's to do it. Look, I'll get the fire going and I'll nip round to Patterson's and I'll get the whisky, tae. Three bottles. Maybe it better be four. They'll need a good nip afore they start.'

She turned and dashed up the stairs, bucket clanking, the organization in her hands, and content with it. In two minutes the fire crackled and then, but only then, Morag turned to the coffin. She lowered the bucket and stood with folded hands. The use of the bed still irritated her, but the coffin was good oak, she could see that, and the silk tassels were bonny.

In the kitchen again she said,

'He just looks a picture, Elsie. As if he'd took his call that easy.'

'Morag, please. . . .'

'Och, I ken. I'll awa' oot and dae the things and you're no to bother. I've a lot of experience of this, mine being a big family and maist of them taken. Oh . . . you're agreed about the ham?'

'Yes, get the ham. Get anything you need or think of. I want this done properly. Here, take my bag. I'll give you the purse. I think there's ten pounds.'

'Och, I'll just charge things, dearie. A pound or two'll do fine the noo. And we've plenty time, too. Just you leave things and I'll lay oot the tea. Or we can dae that when the men are awa'.'

'I'm going to the churchyard.'

Morag stood quite still, shocked.

'You're . . . what? Never! No, Elsie, there's no women goes to the churchyard yet frae the auld toon. They just don't do it. We've none of your fancy foreign ways here. The men wouldn't know where to look.'

'I'm the only relative.'

'It disnae matter, you're a lassie. And that's no your place, Elsie. You bide here wi' me and we'll get the food ready.'

'I'm going to the churchyard.'

'Och, I don't know. And I've no time to stand here blethering. But I'll say this. I like to see things done right. And that's no the way to do it!'

The front door slammed, and the knocker echoed. Elsie went into the scullery and stood looking at her rejected baked meats, the sandwiches on which she had spent most of the morning, traditionally occupied in the manner of Scotswomen dealing with grief. And from the ragged look of the sandwiches it might have been grief all right.

In fact it was terror, the mortal terror which had struck her in that moment of seeing her dead father seeming to reach out towards her, as though there had been a kind of final paroxysm of fury. It wasn't true, of course, she kept telling herself that it couldn't be, only a fevered imagining, but he hadn't gone, as Morag suggested, easily. She knew he hadn't.

She knew, too, that sense of a span on her own living, a contracting one, the future somehow measurable and diminished, as though the turn which was yours and had always been seen as so far away, had somehow moved on to the visible horizon. Her father's death was the precursor of her own, and a sign of the approach to it.

The knocker sounded again. Slowly Elsie went through the kitchen and opened the door, seeing the face of someone she knew but couldn't place for a moment, a face from her childhood.

The Beadle. Older than her father he had always seemed, and even now after the gap of years not much more weathered, a tall, lean man from whose heavily boned face there was no loose flesh to hang.

'I've come to see him, Elsie.'

She groped in her mind for the man's name, but he had always only been the Beadle, a ponderous authority in and about the church building, more to be feared by noisy Sunday School kids than the Minister himself.

'Come in. Yes, do come in. He's upstairs.'

'Up the stair?'

There was surprise in those eyes.

'I'm not much for stairs,' he said. 'The pulpit's all I can be daeing with these days. But I'll go for Airchie.'

He went for Archie, slowly, shuffling a little along the upper hal!, and then into the room, still holding his hat in big knuckled hands. He stared a long time at the coffin, but not going too near it.

'Aye, aye,' he said finally, going on to identify the deceased, as though somehow his purpose in coming had been to prevent fraud. 'Aye, that's Airchie.'

At three the town bell began to toll for Archibald Garr, Elder of the Kirk, Bailie of Kilrudderie, the town's representative on the County Council for seven years, the Superintendent of the Sunday School for nine years, Convener of Parks and Public Works, and carpenter. The hearse came up from the lane and because it was only a short distance to the churchyard there were no other cars, just people walking behind the slow-moving glass box heaped with flowers. People stood in doorways, for the blinds of their windows were drawn now in front of net curtains.

Miss Beale stood in her doorway slightly obscuring Jessie's view, as was her right. She stood straight, watching the approach of the cortège. And then the already upright figure went rigid.

'Jessie! Jessie look! It's not possible That girl. It's her. She's walking behind him. To the churchyard!'

'Well, she's his ain, is she no?'

'You know perfectly well what she is. Imagine McCall letting her do that. That girl walking to the churchyard. It would never have been allowed in the old Minister's day.'

'Aye,' Jessie said. 'But it's no his day. The puir thing looks peekit. A douce like cretur.'

'Douce? How can you use that to her?'

'I'm saying what she looks like in the procession, that's all.'

'It's a scandal! I'm not standing here. I'm not watching it go by.'

I'm not letting them see me in my doorway. And you come in, too, Jessie. Come away in now.'

The door shut. Elsie saw it shutting. She walked alone, the solitary relation, just behind the hearse, in her black dress and hat, and black stockings bought in the draper's. She had her hands folded in front of her as she walked, and no one had come up to keep her company; she didn't know whether because the place she held was a right, or because they didn't want to identify themselves with her in any way.

It was Elsie's first time along in this direction since her return. The street was wide and flanked by butchered limes which sent out sad little limbs of secondary growth, the pruned area of permitted new green out of all proportion to massive old trunks. This was the part of the town once exclusive to the 'good' families, but now in decay, two of the houses hotels, the rest echoing, all with solid frontages almost flush with the pavement. Tucked in amongst the looming Victorian constructions of bay windows and plate glass and ornamental stone work were a few remnants of older building, a kind of basic Scots Georgian, harled and whitewashed and rather smugly fashionable again. Each house had a huge walled garden behind it, slightly sloping upwards against the hill, where the cabbages and roses grew in discreet seclusion.

In all these houses her father had worked, boxing in old sinks or digging out isolated pockets of dry rot. He had his memorials here, a slow but careful worker, who put up shelves to stay and who liked, whenever he could, to use pitch pine even where Norwegian larch would do. Into all these houses, too, he had gone with his cards as an Elder, received in his black suit as someone more than Archie Garr, taken into a front room and given tea with the abnormal weather for the time of year the permitted subject for a formal occasion.

Elsie remembered him coming back from these duties, his grey hair brushed flat, his big hands holding the Bible which was his symbol of office, his face set, grimmer than usual. He had never, at these times, talked to a child newly home from school, and she had gone quietly about the small rooms, almost on tiptoe, sometimes taking her books up the stairs and sitting in the cold by the projecting window, looking out at the narrow, dead street.

The bell clanged on from the town hall tower. Elsie, walking behind the hearse, driven by a sudden need for generosity towards the dead,

searched in her mind for moments that had warmed between them, when he had shown any real consciousness of another life growing and changing under his roof. She couldn't find those moments. If they had been at all they were covered by an overlay of indifference that she knew wasn't a widower's shyness towards his child. Sometimes she was certain that he resented her because she had killed her mother in coming. He had never mentioned this, but she had heard from others; and Morag, with a curious, almost perverse sanctification of the departed, had drawn a glib picture of a mother who had somehow escaped from Heaven by a clerical oversight and was recalled there at the earliest opportunity. Archie Garr had been left below to get on with the shelving and his duties to the community until in the fullness of time it would be his turn for beatification.

He was a good man, Archie Garr. They were all saying that already, even the Minister had said it in his few well chosen words in the house before the coffin was carried out. To Elsie, walking in the clangour of bells, a protest was hopeless, it would serve no one, but it was there. It had been in her heart as long as she could remember, a bitterness against negative goodness, against a grim Scots observance of all the proprieties here below which was the premium payment on a policy that would entitle one to go on observing the same proprieties through all eternity.

She walked behind her father knowing that the most generous in the town would allow her the luxury of shame now, but not feeling it, not able to feel that she had ever deprived her father of anything but a portion of his self-esteem. He had watched her on the telly, seeing the brazen hussy she had become, but not surprised by it, accepting her as the cross the Lord puts on even his worthies. He had bought that box to get the news and know the worst, because a man didn't turn from his cross.

Slowly the procession swung around at the church gates, the hearse soon crunching on gravel as it went past tombs, the older the bigger, as though increasingly this century had been willing to spend less and less on monumental masons.

She would give her father a good stone, of Aberdeen granite, and highly polished, with his place in Kilrudderie written on it in gold letters, and his dates.

The service at the grave didn't take long; they sang of a Christian come to his rest and at a signal from John McCall it was Elsie who

stepped forward to throw the earth, eyes watching, most of them not liking this innovation, particularly with her. Men in black fixed their eyes on her, wearing their Sunday faces, and a dehumanized solemnity. The wind rustled in the old trees and the coffin ropes creaked against the boards holding back the heavy, loamy soil.

And then Elsie began to cry. She couldn't stop it, even though she knew it was the demonstration that these men wanted and hadn't expected. They might warm to her a little because of the tears, and the sobbing which shook her, rationing out a little feeling which she didn't want and couldn't accept. She cried for a loneliness punctuated by death, but not increased by it.

Clara Blane had heard the town bells ringing as she came down the hill to the Doctor's afternoon surgery. The sound made her uneasy on a bright warm day; she didn't like the bell for funerals, it wasn't modern somehow. A lot of these old ideas were just morbid, that's all. She sat now in the waiting-room holding a *Punch* at which she stared without smiling, the echoes of those bells still in her brain, oddly like an omen.

When Mummy went they'd used a new crematorium and it had been all just the way you'd want it. It had been a rainy day, but warm inside, and there were gold stars in the ceiling, and one glass wall on to the garden of remembrance where the tulips had been ever so pretty. You just couldn't understand why people wanted to go on with black hearses and clay dug up and things like that. Death wasn't something you wanted to make a fuss about. It was just a passing over.

Dr. Hill was his own receptionist. He opened the door, poked his head round, and said briskly.

'You next, Mrs. Blane.'

She rose with a small flutter of fear, her heart thumping too quickly in the passage and not quietening in the white room with its sharp, clinical look. Dr. Hill sat down in a chair at his desk and swivelled it around. A big electric clock with a huge, jerking second hand seemed to put a special emphasis on National Health time.

Clara held her bag firmly by both ends, and looked at the polished black linoleum flooring. The Doctor was different somehow in his white surgery overall, not the way he was in your house at all, more neutral, and not so easy to talk to.

'Well now,' he said briskly. 'It's not often we see you. What's the trouble?'

She told him, never really glancing up, but conscious of a kind of change in him, almost as though she was making him happy. She wished it was making her happy.

'So that's it.' He stood. 'We'd better check up, eh?'

Her hands fumbled with the undressing. She had come carefully prepared for this, with a bath, everything new, even her suspender belt, but she was conscious now of having been sweating a little, of suddenly being too hot. She didn't fold her clothes, but bundled them in a heap that was unlike her at the top of the couch. She lay down.

He asked questions all the time, short and to the point, his hands warm, prodding a little. Then he straightened.

'Dress,' he said.

He went back to the chair and sat in it, doing something on a pad, perhaps writing a prescription, giving her time to get organized again. When she was she sat on the chair, holding the handbag by both ends as though she had never left it. He swung around to her, smiling.

'I can confirm your suspicions. Practically.' He was smiling. 'This ought to make you very happy.'

'But Doctor, I'm thirty-six.'

'What of it? You've had one before. Maybe it'll be a little brother for Lucy. Don't like only children. Get a bit odd. Does your husband know? I mean, have you told him what you thought?'

'No.'

'Then go home and make him a special supper. Give him a bottle of beer with it. How are your bowels? Regular?'

'Well, I . . .'

'Come, come, Mrs. Blane. Proper elimination is something which doesn't seem to matter with the female through a lot of her life. But it does when she's having a baby.'

She told him about her bowels and it seemed to be exactly what he expected, for he nodded. The pen began to make whorls on the pad.

'And calcium tablets,' he said suddenly. 'You may have read that they're not supposed to be a damn' bit of use. Well, all I know is that I feed 'em to my pregnancies and my caries rate is astonishingly cut down.'

'I'm afraid I don't understand, Doctor?'

'Tooth decay. Your baby is making bones, isn't he? Well, he takes

the calcium from you for that. Pregnant women often have their teeth go bad as a result. How are your teeth by the way ?'

'They're my own still.'

'Splendid. That's what I like to hear. Have a look at them. Open.' He came over.

'Uh-hm. Better go to the dentist.'

'But . . . I don't have toothache.'

'When will the Scots learn that that is the time to go to the dentist ? Do you know that we have the worst teeth in Europe ? And probably Afro-Asia as well. During the war an American dentist I knew said it was a kind of agony to him to look in a British mouth. Plenty of greens in your diet. And I don't mean by that a bit of stewed cabbage. . . . Take spinach, not cooked more than five minutes, and green peas, and beans.'

Clara Blane went away from the Doctor's office with the feeling that somehow in his surgery she had left herself behind and been converted into a device for carrying a child. She felt invaded and uneasy and not a little frightened.

Having Lucy hadn't been any picnic. Everyone had told her that she had the hips for it, and the district nurse had said that it was just a case of open and out Lucy would come. But it hadn't been like that at all. They'd given her blood transfusions and for a long time she hadn't known anything, in a deep black escape from pain. And then Jimmy had been leaning over her, the perspiration standing out on his forehead.

She'd seen in the pictures mothers coming round like that and wanting their babies at once. Clara hadn't wanted Lucy, she hadn't even thought of her, she'd looked at Jimmy and said: 'It was terrible.'

'Twilight sleep and bicycle exercises for six months and all the rest of it didn't change things, it was terrible. And it scared you, right down into your stomach. Eat greens and take calcium tablets and mind your bowels and leave the rest to nature. But that wasn't all there was to it, whatever Dr. Hill might say. The trouble was she hadn't had him last time and he didn't know how it was with her.'

She was to go home and give Jimmy a bottle of beer and tell him. Right now she wanted a cup of tea.

The Nook Café had seen quite a lot of Clara for morning coffees before they moved from the Council houses up on to the hill. In those

days she would pause, shopping bag full, with her neighbours, never perhaps quite one of them, but willing to be pleasant. She had always been that, and made a point of it, too. *She and Jimmy hadn't moved up on the hill to be snooty whatever anyone might say*, and she would still pass the time of day with anyone if they showed signs of wanting it. It wasn't her fault that they didn't show the signs and it wasn't a thing she let trouble her at all.

The Nook startled Clara. It had been renovated, all the old insides torn out and new ones put in, bright plastic covered tables and chairs in place of the old brown painted booths. A long curving counter was covered with shiny looking machines and there were three different kinds of paper on the walls and fixtures that threw the light up. It was really very modern and nice. The only thing she didn't like was a great red juke-box which was just starting to play. A gum-chewing girl with her hair straggling out of a piled up cone had put in the money. The voice, bellowing at them, was American.

'Gotcha, gotcha, gotcha, gotcha!'

'A cup of tea please,' Clara said, at the counter, not quite loud enough.

'Eh?'

The girl in there, surrounded by steam and brightness, was moving in time to the music, her shoulders heaving.

'Tea!'

The urn hissed.

'Sixpence. Anything else? Biscuit. Fourpence, tuppence.'

Clara took her tea and a twopenny biscuit to a table. She was near two women she just knew who glanced at her and then back at each other. Their voices made a kind of seething shrill turbulence under the howling from the red box. It wasn't a restful place any more, but the tea was strong and good. She drank it gratefully, in little sips, putting the cup back carefully into the saucer each time. She got out a hanky from her bag and wiped the tips of her fingers because the chocolate on the biscuit had grown damp and sticky.

Suddenly the box was silent. The stillness in the café was unearthly, an emptiness that seemed curiously unendurable, as though the place was deprived of all of its norm of vitality. The gum-chewing girl got up with a coin again. She was wearing pants so tight that each of her buttocks seemed to have a separate existence of its own. This time the beat from the box was slower, the voice thinner but still male.

'I don' wanna be alone widoutchew, I don' wanna be alone all night. . . .'

The gum-chewing girl was leaning on the machine, her head almost on her arms, peering down into its glowing entrails, and her tartan behind began a luscious, slow weaving.

Clara thought about a cigarette and then decided against it. She was certainly glad, with the changes going on down here in the town, that Lucy would be brought up there on the hill. She might have to go to school with the rest of them, but she would be coming home to something very different and a long way from the new Nook. If it was like this in the afternoon it was difficult to imagine what it would be like about half past ten in the evening when the pubs had emptied.

How lucky she'd been with Jimmy; he'd never been a man to want to meet the boys in the pub, even before they moved. He'd rather do things about the place and when he wasn't at that he watched the telly. On Sundays they took four papers, two of them good ones, and that way they kept up with a lot of things that wouldn't interest the people down here. Maybe later on Lucy could go to a private girls' school. This was a secret dream that Clara hadn't revealed to Jimmy, afraid of his reaction, but it might work out not too difficult for them when they had got on with their payments. And after all it was years ahead. Jimmy was a departmental manager now, he could be anything by then, if Scotsroofs was expanding the way everyone said it was going to.

She thought then with a little start of surprise, of the new child, realizing she had escaped momentarily. A boy, the Doctor had said. Somehow it wasn't a thing she had ever thought about at all. She knew that Jimmy couldn't have meant it to happen, that he must have been just careless again, as he was sometimes. She didn't like it happening like this, without planning. Their whole life was planning now, and they had both wanted things that way.

A small resentment stirred against her husband. The trouble with men, even good men like Jimmy, was that they didn't stop to think. It was what they wanted now. It wasn't a real bitterness, for he considered her in most things, but there were risks he shouldn't take, not without thinking. You'd got to think in this life, be on the watch the whole time, that is if you were going up the way they were. It wasn't easy going up, you could slip.

Sometimes she wondered what would happen if Jimmy lost his health and there wasn't that seventeen pounds, eight shillings and

four pence coming in every week after tax was paid. It didn't bear thinking about, really, how they would carry on. Maybe you could get a kind of recess from payments for six months or something, but it wouldn't be easy to fix without people knowing, and that would be dreadful. Still, he was a strong man, always had been, just colds in winter, that was all.

Clara wondered then about leaving a tip, whether you did in a place like this where nobody served you. She had her threepence ready when she decided against it. Better to put that threepence in the tin in the kitchen. These girls did all right, lolling about in the middle of the day waving their bottoms. What were the parents of that one thinking of, for goodness' sake?

On a little flurry of indignation she left the Nook, going out into the street where normal sound seemed diminished and even old cars moved quietly. She panted a little on the hill road, surprised at herself, knowing it couldn't be the baby yet, wondering if she wasn't as strong as she used to be. She was certainly older. She had even come to the feeling that she could look at forty and not mind any more, the way things were now.

Then she was in Crieff Terrace, on the level there, with the white house waiting, shining out for her. She went towards it quickly, getting out her key before it was really necessary, to hold it in her hand, remembering when Jimmy had taken three new keys, given her one, kept one himself and put the other in reserve. The key she held was still as shiny as it had been that day, still a kind of talisman.

Lucy was out in the patio, sitting composedly where she had been left, with two dolls and a toy pram. She looked up at her mother calmly, but didn't smile. She was a child who rarely smiled, and when almost bullied into it seemed to resent something that didn't come naturally, showing white little teeth briefly, then shutting her thin mouth again over them.

'Hello, darling. Did Mrs. Curtis look in to see you as she promised?'

'Yes.'

'Well, Mummy hasn't been long, has she?'

'No.'

'Hungry dear? Would you like your tea?'

'No.'

Lucy got up then, as though she had decided this was the time to

make a move, packed one doll into the pram, carried the other and began to push the pram towards the living-room. In there she arranged the dolls sitting up on the sofa, half watched by Clara, who thinned out some dead flowers. Lucy leaned on the sofa with bony elbows, looking at the dolls.

'She's artistic,' Clara thought. 'That must be it. She's going to do something like that. Maybe play the piano or paint or be an actress.'

It would be wonderful to switch on the telly and see Lucy coming on to the screen, though before that happened there would be some fights with Jimmy. He looked on the practical side always, and you couldn't blame him there. But with Lucy grown up things would be different, they'd be somewhere by then, and their child would have a head start.

In the kitchen preparing tea, she remembered again about the new child, finding the adjustment to the idea difficult somehow, as though it wasn't easy to expand a careful pattern to make room. There was, too, so much else to think about before that happened, so much that she dreaded.

Jimmy came home in a bad temper. She knew that from the way he entered the house, the way he shut the outer door. She heard his footfalls with a fleeting apprehension which had to be covered up with a quick, forced smile.

'Tea will be ready soon, dear,' she called out, not asking about his day.

There was a kind of grunt through the thin wall, then the sound of him in the sitting-room. Clara moved amongst her gadgets, most of which she used rarely, doing a fry on the gas cooker, the fat sizzling. Jimmy liked a fry for his tea and though it wasn't supposed to be the thing for hot weather she saw that he got it two or three times a week.

They ate in the kitchen, the three of them, Lucy in her high chair pushing pieces of sausage about her plate with the fork she insisted on using, and when she did put something in her mouth chewing on it with an enduring solemnity which was somehow like an old person, like Clara's mother in her last days when her teeth hadn't fitted well. They didn't talk at the meal and throughout it the telly blared an invitation for the evening, hurrying them on. In less than ten minutes Jimmy was through to it, leaving his wife with the dishes.

Jimmy was a real Scots husband in this; there was plenty he would do about the place, but no cooking or dishes, and he never gave Lucy

her bath either. Still, Clara didn't mind; it was natural for a man to be tired after his working day and wanting a bit of peace. She knew, too, that her husband was haunted by the secret fear that he might miss something good on the screen, that something talked about next day at the factory would be offered while he was digging the back piece or cleaning the car. Often he would break off these tasks to shout:

'Anything good on?'

Clara, because she liked selective viewing, usually reassured him.
'Just dancing, dear.'

With Lucy in bed Clara went out into the garden for a little, out on to the lawn on which they had used too rank a seed and it wasn't coming right at all. Clara wanted this lawn like a green on the golf course, smooth as a carpet, sloping gently away from the patio glass screen to an edging of bright flowers which would be the lower frame for the view of the hills. Her ideal was remote as yet and she was very near to telling Jimmy they must dig up all this grass and begin again, but that was something for a time when he was full of a sense of their achievement in the place. And clearly not tonight.

'Could do a bit of watering,' he said, suddenly.

She turned.

'Oh, Jimmy. It's not a good programme?'

'No. I canny sit staring all the time anyway.'

He was beginning to get her idea, that you wanted to be choosey to get the good out of it. She saw that his ill-temper was gone, probably from the fry, and he gave a contented little burp that somehow confirmed this.

'I could get chairs. We could sit out here.'

'Bring the ones from the patio, dear.'

'Aye.'

They sat on the lawn that affronted Clara, its roughness unpleasant to the feet.

'Look at the train,' Jimmy said.

'Yes.'

She turned, taking the plunge suddenly, the moment not planned at all and not ideal, but to be got over.

'I was at the Doctor's today.'

'Eh?'

'Dr. Hill. I went to see him.'

There was comforting alarm in his eyes, leaping there, concern for her eclipsing everything.

'Clara, are you no right?'

'It's . . . not that, Jimmy.'

'But what for did you go to the Doctor's?'

'Jimmy . . . we're . . . going to have a little one.'

He stared.

'You mean . . . ?'

She put out a hand towards him. He didn't take it. He seemed astounded.

'A baby! My Gawd.'

'Jimmy! Don't be like that. I . . . I couldn't help it.'

'Och, I don't mean that, hen. But . . . it shakes you. When did you know?'

'I didn't, I just . . .'

'Why did you no tell me?'

'I wanted to be sure.'

'A baby. Here! Will it be a boy?'

Suddenly Clara was miserable. She said, in a small voice:

'I don't know. How could I?'

She got up and went into the house, through the patio to the sofa in the sitting-room, dropping on it. The telly was still on, a play, all of them hard at it. Clara wept, her shoulders shaking.

'Lassie, you're not to take on,' Jimmy said, touching her.

'I'm not a lassie. I'm . . . I'm too old. Don't you see? It wasn't easy before. Dr. Hill . . . I . . . He doesn't know. Oh, Jimmy, I . . .'

He held her, awkwardly.

'You're not to take on. It'll be fine. These days they fix things easy.'

'That's just a lot of talk; I don't believe it.'

'Clara, it's the truth. Willie Donaldson was tellin' me . . .'

'I don't want to hear about that woman! She's had six. It's me. It's me!'

'Aye. So it is, Clara, so it is. But we'll look after you, don't you worry, hen.'

'Jimmy, I hate being called hen, you know that. You said you wouldn't.'

'I forget, that's all. You're not to mind, Clara. Och, we'll fix this between us.'

'Between us. I like that!'

'You know what I mean. I can take a lot off you when you're not feeling up to it.'

'I won't be, a lot of the time. I know that. Oh, Jimmy, I want to be glad like the Doctor told me, but I keep thinking of the money.'

'Eh?'

'The things we'll need. We'll have to get a new pram. It's going to cost a lot. How are we going to do it, Jimmy?'

His eyes went past her to the screen, fixed on the flickering. Then he sat down on the floor, still holding her hand, but without any firmness. She knew he was remembering the bills for Lucy, before they had the house and the car and the new furniture to pay for. He'd only been making thirteen pounds then, but their hire purchase had been about two. It was ten pounds, ten shillings and eightpence now, out of seventeen pounds odd. He took his piece to work to save using the canteen.

'I've kept a lot of Lucy's things,' she said. 'I didn't mean to, but I did. We've still got them, Jimmy. We might even borrow a pram.'

'We'll buy it. The damn thing can go on H.P. It won't be much. I'm no borrowing from anyone. That's no part of our way now.'

'But everything is borrowing, Jimmy.'

'It's no, it's H.P., that's different. I'll work it out, Clara. I might get a raise.'

'Oh, my goodness, is there a chance?'

'Why not? We're expanding. There'll be a lot more money comin' in to Scotsroofs. Some of it's my due, isn't it?'

He sat up straighter, with his solution.

'Sure. That's what I'll do. I'll get a raise from the old man. I'll ask him tomorrow.'

THE Innis house in Kilrudderie had been built in 1889 for the retiral of a Dundee jute king, lower down than most of the new villas now appearing around the town, but still far enough up the hill to have a view over its own trees into the valley. It sat in five acres, indestructible granite, the kind of house that could only be eaten away from inside by the creeping fluff of dry rot, but for the time being this was kept away by an elaborate oil heating system which even went up into the attics. It had eighteen rooms, all of them somehow unsatisfactory, the big ones pompous, the smaller cluttered by too many windows, ornate marble fireplaces and wrought plaster ceilings.

Eliza had spent a great deal of money on the furnishings, achieving an effect of padded lushness; you went into a house that seemed insulated against the real world beyond it, where your feet never touched a board and every step was cushioned by thick carpet laid over underfelt. In winter it was maintained at a steady sixty-five degrees, with fires in the public rooms, and there was a conservatory leading off the dining-room where even in January orchids hung in bloom and the air was heavy with the hot, alien scent of palms. Eliza was the only woman in Kilrudderie who managed a permanent cook and two maids living in, as well as an outside staff of two. The gardens had shaved lawns, rhododendrons, clumps of South American grasses and the exclusive aroma of well groomed ornamental blue spruce. It was the kind of place which when approached in summer up the artfully winding drive gave an impression of being a particular Valhalla for those who had managed to set aside their second hundred thousand. There was occasionally laughter from the tennis court or a splashing from the swimming-pool which Will Innis had installed as a try out for a new process of pouring concrete. But more often than pool, kidney-shaped, terrace-edged and trimmed with bright canvas furniture, struck an alien note of the exotic. Most of the time, decked out with colour, it seemed to sit sending out an invitation to a party that was never held.

On a Saturday afternoon, with an air temperature of seventy, freak weather for May, Jock sat by the pool in nothing but a bright

red pair of Hawaiian swimming shorts bought at Saks. They suited his lean hips and dark, hirsute body, and he lay sprawled in a long chair with wheels, drinking beer.

Sheina saw him there from the steps of the family downstairs sitting-room. She walked slowly towards him across grass which stayed bright green without sprinklers and where not a daisy showed, a lawn with the immaculate smoothness of a seedsman's catalogue. She walked slowly because she was more than a little frightened, conscious that never before had she gone to Jock with a challenge.

Her anger had stayed warm all night, surviving breakfast and a salad lunch with her mother. She hadn't nursed it at all, feeling it smouldering, ready to flare up at a prodding. But she was afraid of Jock, a kind of instinctive fear, something she realized now she had always had.

He was reading and even when she was close he didn't see her, reaching out an arm for his glass and lifting it. He wasn't wearing sunglasses and there were deep furrows between his eyebrows.

She stepped on paving. He only moved his head, jerking it up, but that movement as quick as a lizard's.

'Hello. Thinking of a swim, Sheina? The water is actually bearable. I've been in.'

She swallowed.

'Jock, I want to talk to you.'

'By all means. Sit down.'

She didn't sit. She wanted to be above him, looking down, but his relaxed body, his smile, was somehow unnerving, even chilling to a held anger.

'Enjoy your Ball?' he asked.

'Yes. Pity you didn't come.'

'My dear sis, my idea of hell is a regimental summer Ball.'

She wondered then if her father was as hairy as this, it was something she just didn't know. Her own body was smooth enough.

Jock yawned. He lifted a toasted leg, dark before the sun worked on it, and looked at it for a moment. He had control of all his muscles all right, a tight little machine.

'You danced all the old dances. And the great lolloping boys were as pretty as ever in their kilts.'

'It was like that, yes,' she said. Then she took a slow breath. 'Colin drove me home. He spent the night at Rosemount.'

Jock looked at her.

'Have you had a row? It sometimes happens after too much champagne. Is it my shoulder you want?'

'No. Jock, we came through Kilrudderie on the way home. Colin was pretty high, and I did the driving. I suppose we must have reached here about three.'

She was certain that the relaxed body in the chair stiffened just a little.

'Well?'

'Colin kept talking about the old town at night. Kilrudderie. How it looked. He said bits of it were like a set from *Don Giovanni*.'

'How extraordinary to think of Colin as an opera lover.'

'You don't know much about him.'

'No, I suppose I don't. Go on. Bits of Kilrudderie are like an opera set at night. There was a moon and you went to look at them?'

'That's right. We parked at the foot of Smiddy Wynd. You know where it is, of course?'

'Naturally, dear.'

Jock lifted his beer glass and sipped, but his black eyes were on her over the rim. She thought they had gone cold, though this might be imagined. Sheina spoke slowly, carefully.

'A man came down the wynd. Without making any sound at all. We had the hood down and I could see pretty well. Colin wasn't noticing, but I found myself waiting for the man to step out into moonlight. He didn't. He must have gone back again, seeing us sitting there.'

'One of Kilrudderie's night cats. The old town has them you know.'

'Jock! I drove home. Then I let Colin drive himself back to Rosemount, I thought he was all right by then. I made him go quickly. Then I waited, not outside, but at the top of the stairs. In about fifteen minutes you came in.'

Jock laughed.

'Since I became a big shot I suffer from insomnia. It's an occupational disease. I was out looking at the herbaceous in the moonlight.'

'You were coming back from Elsie Garr!'

'Well?' Jock said quietly.

Sheina took a step towards him.

'It's only a week since her father was buried.'

'Mourning is considerably shortened these days.'

She stared at him then, as though shocked and frightened by a stranger. In a moment she said:

'I saw you. Someone else will soon. And recognize you. It won't take them long to jump to what it means . . . you being about the streets of the town at that hour.'

'Sheina, this isn't something I'm discussing with you.'

'Why? It concerns me doesn't it? If a scandal breaks in Kilrudderie?'

'There have been worse scandals in Kilrudderie. The town's still here. And it won't break.'

'Mummy was afraid of this all along. That you had brought the girl here. And you did.'

'I did not! Shut up, Sheina!'

'Childish of me, wasn't it? Getting you to be best man. I thought it would . . .'

'I know. I'll resign. It's a job for a kilt anyway. And I suggest we both mind our own business. You're a big girl now.'

'Supposing I tell Daddy?'

Jock smiled then.

'Our father wouldn't like it. But he'd survive. You see . . . I'm a chip off the old block.'

Sheina took a very long breath.

'What do you mean?' she asked, her voice almost a whisper.

'I'm damn' certain the Innis strain goes on down there in the town. You and I are only part of the old man's stock. It's quite a Scots tradition with the man in authority, you know. Plenty of dukes have left behind them a stronger line than the one that followed them to the family tomb.'

'You mean, Daddy . . . ? I don't believe it! How can you be so beastly? You've made this up!'

'I admit it's guesswork. I'm still just at the stage of looking at noses when I mix with the jolly burghers. We'll find out when he goes, though. There'll be a Trust of some sort. That's another thing about the Scots, their sense of responsibility. No Latin carelessness at all. There's many a wee shoppie been started up on capital that was found via the mattress.'

'Why are you saying all this to me?'

'I think you're old enough for it.'

'I don't believe a word.'

He laughed.

'You will later. When you grow up.'

'It's beastly. And it's a kind of defence, something you've worked up. Accusing Daddy!'

'You'd find that Mother believes it of him.'

'What?'

'Ask her. And now let's stop shouting at each other. Don't worry, Sheina, I'll be discreet. Open scandal never breaks in this country. There are always plenty about to push down the lid and sit on it.'

Sheina stood staring at the pool, her hands together. She felt a child, holding to a childish love that was a long way from the reality of living. People in authority? Colin's father? Colin?

'Don't start to blub!' he said sharply.

'I'm not! Why the hell should I?'

'That's better. No reason at all. You'll grow up into a sensible girl.'

She looked at him, into his dark eyes. She said, very quietly:

'I hate you!'

'Oh, come, come.'

'Jock, I feel sorry for Elsic Garr. I don't know her, but I feel sorry for her. If she came back to this town just for you, I feel sorry for her.'

'She'd be surprised at your pity.'

'Then you did bring her here?'

'No. We didn't intend to meet. But it happened. If you like, we couldn't stop ourselves.'

'Would you marry her?'

Jock reached out to a small table for a packet of his American cigarettes, lighting one without offering them. She watched his every movement, as though there was now a certain fascination about everything he did. Through her anger, and that sharp, still childish misery, there was curiosity too.

'Would you marry her, Jock?'

He let the smoke trickle out of his nostrils.

'Elsie? No.'

'She's . . . just a convenience, is that it?'

'Oh, Sheina, stop talking like a girl straight from finishing school.'

You're not a baby any more. I always did think, though, that Colin was a cold fish.'

'Leave Colin out of this!'

'All right! But we were getting personal. You have to be able to take it if you start that.'

'Damn you!' she said.

Sheina turned away, back across the lawn, trying not to hurry, but with that sense of his eyes watching her all the way. There had been a picture of Jock in her mind, her adult picture of him, something recently come to, like a jigsaw not quite complete, with pieces yet to be fitted, but enough already there for the main effect, for understanding. She was his sister and there had seemed something intuitive in their relation. Now it was as though he had reached out with one hand and knocked the carefully fitted fragments back into a jumbled heap. The picture was lost. She didn't know if she would ever try to set it up again, whether she would want to.

It was defeat she had suffered with Jock, blank, sudden defeat, as though for the first time he had let her have a look into the area where he really lived. It was almost terrifying to see a whole design of life quite outside everything she herself accepted. It wasn't what he had told her so much as the way in which his words had seemed to fringe a calculating coldness. Long ago, she realized now, Jock had assessed them all, his family, and the terrible thing was that these assessments must be sound enough for his purposes. He was dealing with his father and his mother and in a lesser way with her, guessing their reactions to any set of circumstances and never very far out in his guess.

How easily he had dealt with her anger just now, patting her on the head, telling her to run along and play at her version of life and not to butt in on his.

She went to her bedroom and shut the door, closing herself into the old sanctuary of childhood, knowing now that she had never really tried to push herself out from this shelter, that she clung always to the norm of the known and familiar, and the surface movement. She had seen her father and her mother as she wanted them, if not surrounded by any glittering happiness at least settled and secure, their living established. It was now as though Jock had suddenly wrenched open a door to a long, dark passage down which she had never walked.

She didn't want to go down that passage. In this room the old norm was established, there was even a cupboard still stocked with the leftovers from being a child, and on a top shelf the teddy bear she had taken to bed instead of a doll. No one had ever suggested she clean out that cupboard, carrying armfuls of the past down to the ashbin.

When you grow up, Jock had said. Had she really been avoiding this, even making her love for Colin part of a fantasy of childhood? She had looked ahead to the orange blossom and the Episcopalian choir and Colin handsome in his Black Watch kilt. It could have gone on, too, a kind of game played out even in marriage, yet another security added to the ones already making the solid foundation of her pattern.

It couldn't go on now. It was frightening to face this, to feel in the comfortable familiar room so alone, with no one to turn to, no one to come when you cried out on waking suddenly in the frightening dark.

Her father might have other children down there in the town. Jock wouldn't have said this without his half proofs which he expected to have confirmed later. And the shock wasn't from any sense of outrage that her father had known other women besides his wife, it was the feeling of continuity through it all, of something accepted, with perhaps her mother knowing all the time even while it was going on.

This was the child in her still, she knew, but the child crying out in bitter protest against the compromises which could come, which were always threatening in any relation. They might even threaten her with Colin. And she couldn't bear it, she couldn't bear to let the thought of that touch her.

Colin loved her the way she loved him. They were complete, or would be in marriage. It had to be like that.

She got up and went to the phone by her bed.

'I want Perth,' she said, and gave the number.

A Scots voice answered her.

'I'm afraid Captain Fairway-Campbell is not in the Mess just now.'

'Well . . . could you get him? This is Miss Innis. Miss Sheina Innis.'

'I'll see, Miss Innis.'

There was a long wait. Sheina didn't allow herself to think in that interval, just sitting on the bed with the receiver held in both hands. His voice, when it came, sounded irritated.

'Colin? I hope I haven't taken you from anything . . . ?'

'Good Lord, Sheina, I'm Duty Officer today. You knew that. I told you.'

'Oh. Yes. Colin, I'm sorry. It's just that . . .'

'What, for heaven's sake?'

'You're all right? I was a bit worried. I mean, last night I had the feeling you'd be noticing things today. You know.'

'If you mean have I a helluva head, I do. But so has three-quarters of the Mess. If you were so worried about me you should have brought me into your splendid mansion and brewed black coffee.'

'Oh, Colin. I was tired, too.'

He laughed. Then he was faintly admonitory.

'Really, you know you can't do this kind of thing. Tinkling the bell and calling me just when it suits you. If you'd ever had a job you'd know how it is.'

'I'm sorry. Would you have liked me to have a job? Do you think I need to learn a sense of responsibility? Perhaps it would have matured me.'

'Don't run off with the bit between your teeth, for heaven's sake! Why did you ring just now?'

'I wanted you to know I love you.'

'Oh. Well, that's nice to hear in the middle of a hungover afternoon. I've no doubts myself.'

She began to cry, sitting there holding the mouthpiece, her hands shaking a little. She hadn't cried in front of Jock, her anger still defending her. It was gone now.

'Colin, when am I going to see you?'

'Wednesday.'

'Not before? I could drive down to Perth. There are some things I need to get. I could . . .'

'Sheina, is there anything wrong?'

'No. No, nothing at all. . . .'

'Look, there's someone signalling me outside this box. I'll have to go. Like me to ring you tonight?'

'No, there's no need. Yes. . . .'

'I didn't quite get that? I'll have to go, Sheina. I'll call you tonight.'

She put down the receiver. You had to be alone sometimes, you had to accept it. There was a time when she had liked being alone, or what she had called that. But not now.

Sheina got up and went over to the mirror, staring into the long cheval glass which had been installed when she was seventeen and a young girl was supposed to start looking at herself. She did it now, the glass in a shaft of sunlight, seeing the bright reflection of her face and body, while in there the room behind was shadowed and dim.

When the hall gong rang for dinner Sheina was ready. It was a stately meal in the Innis house still, taken in the big, panelled rather gloomy dining-room, at a round mahogany table that could become oblong for company. She knew there would be soup, fish, the main dish, a sweet, cheese, and that it would take at least an hour. There would be flowers and the wall sconces glowing even on a summer night.

'Hello, darling,' Eliza said, when they met on the upper landing. 'Where have you been hiding yourself all afternoon?'

'Reading.'

'You should have had someone in for tennis or a swim. Really, you mustn't sit just waiting when Colin isn't around.'

She squeezed her daughter's arm.

Eliza was wearing black, which suited her, a colour that it had taken her a long time to come to, but in which she now always managed an expensive chic. It seemed to Sheina then that this groomed, familiar smartness was something her mother assumed in her own house because it took time, and she had so much of that to use up. An hour to dress in the evening was something you could count on, twenty minutes for your bath, another twenty for your face that didn't show wear if you managed to give it a pack a couple of days a week. And you did manage. You thought about your dress, too, sliding open the doors of the big built-in cupboards and choosing, as though you were going out even when you weren't.

Tonight her mother had used perfume.

'Such a heavenly day,' Eliza said. 'I did some gardening. Maitland didn't like it at all. He always gets cross when he sees me in the alpine garden. But it is a fact that my specials do very well indeed. I've got some perfectly lovely early heaths in bloom.'

'I must see them, Mother.'

'Yes, do. We'll go out after. It's not a good night for television.'

Will Innis was already in the dining-room, standing with his back

to a big mantelpiece which had been converted to a V-backed wood-burning grate. A log smouldered though it was warm, part of the evening ritual for women in thin dresses. Jock came behind them, wearing a grey suit and an American tie.

'Well, here we are,' Will said, as though this rounding up of his family gave him a vague kind of satisfaction.

They moved in to the table, chairs scraping, and the maid came through a swing door with soup on a tray, the girl half-frightened-looking. All of Eliza's maids somehow managed to look a little frightened, apparently dimly conscious of being caught in something out of their time, and unnerved because of this. Every now and then an Innis maid upset the pattern by making a bolt for the outside world and a better paid job in a factory, but they were always quickly replaced, and under this roof the new face soon assumed a permanent expression of mild awe.

'Soup's cold,' Will Innis said.

Eliza crumbled a roll.

'I know. All cooks have their little eccentricities. This one likes cold soup.'

'Considering what I pay her . . .'

'Will, it's not what you pay at all these days. The miracle is having a cook. I'm always hoping you'll realize that. And this one I want to keep.'

'So I eat cold soup?'

'Yes,' Eliza said.

Jock laughed.

'Mother's a realist.'

Eliza looked at her son.

'I've had to be.'

The flower arrangement, lilacs and iris, was low, and Sheina could look at Jock across it. She was conscious of his eyes on her often and once she lifted her head, meeting a steady gaze and a half-smile. Her anger against him was gone, replaced by a dull neutrality which seemed to extend to all of them at this table, as though they were a long way beyond her. She was conscious particularly of her father as a stranger, an old man with his life in concentric circles around him, only one of these his family. This was something her mother must have learned to accept long ago, her circle and no more. She had made a peace with the arrangement. With a kind of harshness which almost

surprised her Sheina thought that if you had a lot of money it wouldn't be too difficult.

But Colin and she wouldn't have a lot of money.

The new loneliness was close, lived with for an afternoon, but still frightening. Jock had lived with it always from choice.

'Sheina dear,' Eliza said. 'I've been thinking about that London trip for your clothes. I don't think we ought to put it off much longer. Why not next week? We could get a sleeper down on Tuesday night. . . .'

Sheina was caught unawares.

'Oh, no, Mother. Not Tuesday.'

'Why ever not?'

'I'm seeing Colin on Wednesday.'

Jock smiled.

'It's love,' he said. 'Her man before clothes.'

Will Innis grunted.

'I've no money to throw around,' he told them. 'But I don't suppose it's any damn' use saying that?'

'No use whatever,' Eliza agreed. 'We can go Thursday then, Sheina. And stay over the week-end. We might take in a theatre. Would you like that?'

Sheina agreed she would like that. It had been something she looked forward to, this shopping trip with her mother to London, the hours in dress shops, the light lunches in between, hearing Eliza say casually, 'It's absurdly extravagant, of course, but we'll take it.' That was the way Eliza Innis shopped, as though it was a right she had earned, something she could take from her husband, knowing that his surface splutterings didn't matter. It was a right established from old bitterness shut away.

Sheina knew this now as though she was walking down that dark passage to which Jock had opened the door. She didn't look at any of them, just the flowers, trying to reach out in her heart for Colin but feeling that he, too, was somehow at a great distance.

16

MARY Wood rarely missed a dancing in the Town Hall. She used her mother to make possible these escapes, but not ruthlessly, as though she understood that the occupational therapy of looking after four children was a practical remedy for Kirsty's whining defeat in life. Mary used her mother, too, when she was out at work. Her pregnancies had made a steady job difficult, forcing her to give up as an assistant in a sweetie shop and newsagent's. She now worked as a household help and in this field her record of slight moral turpitude was no disadvantage, for her employers rather expected something of the sort from the lower orders. And anyway she sang as she worked hard, a bright presence in the houses she visited, very often bringing home presents for her young as an extra reward.

For the dancing Mary washed herself in a tin tub in the kitchen, was liberal with a Woolworth perfume and put on a bright cotton frock bought off the hook in the cheap dress department of a chain store in Dundee. She had a pair of high-heeled slippers with long points and kept in reserve flesh-coloured nylons which stood up well to vigorous use.

Mary was usually one of the first in the hall, she liked to see people come in, sitting with her hands in her lap in the female seats ranged along one wall. When the music started she was soon 'lifted', for her dancing was light and her good temper permanent. The fact that she no longer had a steady young man troubled her only occasionally, usually during the sweet sentimentality of weddings, or when there was a male parent in evidence by the cot of a new arrival. She longed then not so much for the conveniences of matrimony as for the moments of emotional luxury of which she was deprived.

The Scots . . . excepting, of course, the middle classes . . . tend to be tolerant of the first bastard, it being accepted in many rural areas as a kind of test run, but a second is frowned upon and a third positive evidence of laxity. With Mary's fourth, however, Kilrudderie abandoned judgment and just accepted her for the cheery girl she was. She never lacked companions of both sexes and on the great annual festival of Hogmanay the Woods' little four-roomed house echoed

to a bellowing of conviviality. It had, in fact, almost become a tradition in the town for any unattached male celebrant with too much whisky taken to seek out the Woods' front room, there to sleep where he fell until a morning awakening to the smell of bacon Mary was frying. She would then lend these boys her late father's razor, make them eat, and send them out on a second day's carousel with a sizeable first dram from her bottle.

The dancing was sporadic in winter but after May, with the first flurry of summer visitors, it settled into a regular thing every Saturday night, with music provided by the Kilrudderie and District Hot Stompers. The sound which shook the hall was mostly jive, with an occasional dismal foxtrot thrown in for any squares who might have turned up. Twice during the evening the town's sole surviving piper would come wailing up the stairs from below, and with a kind of gloomy acceptance of tradition the young men and women would arrange themselves into sets for an eightsome reel. But they all looked relieved when it was over and America came back into the hall, a singer with a mid-Perthshire accent wailing Harlem gibberish.

Mary, though she loved dancing, tended to avoid the partners who wanted at some stage to tuck her under their arms, with her feet in the air. She was just past her mid-twenties and time had imposed a certain decorum. She left that sort of thing to the young ones, and usually the soldiers to them too.

The soldiers came by bus load from Perth, kilted Black Watch, there being a barrack room tradition that the comprehensive hospitality of a small town was worth the trip. They stayed in the pubs until closing time and then, tanked up on beer, swept upon the town hall in force, often to be greeted by shrill cries, 'It's the bloody Jocks!'

On this early summer night it was more an infiltration than an assault, only a dozen of them. They came in the kilt, wearing their bonnets into the hall, and standing just inside the door sizing up the talent. Other young men in respectable blue suitings or stove-pipe trousers and long jackets were somehow diminished by the soldiery, by the kilt-tossing arrogance of the uniform.

Mary had one look and then turned her eyes away, up to the platform and the band who rested sweating. She was due a lifting from the butcher's young assistant and had caught him eyeing her across the hall, as though ready enough to send a signal that would

save unnecessary talk when the music started. She was almost exactly in the middle of the long row of girls in light summer dresses.

'Awf fy hot in here,' said her neighbour on the right.

'It is that.'

'Was you dancin' with Willie? He's hell. Ma gawd, his feet. You have to be real nippy to miss them. You know this, when I see him comin' and I'm sure, I just make for the Ladies. I do that. Och, it's hot.'

The music started. Almost at once the floor was solid with males moving over. Mary didn't bother to watch them, she was sure of Johnny.

'Yer dancin'?'

She looked up in surprise. It wasn't Johnny at all, but a kilted soldier six feet tall. He had jet black hair curled tight on his head, plastered with water earlier but now sprung out of all control. His eyes were a bright hard blue. At once Mary knew he was her kind of man.

'Is it me you're wanting?' she asked.

'Aye. Who else?'

She looked for Johnny then. He was loitering, but not in open competition.

'Oh, well,' Mary said, and rose.

It was one of the rare slow foxtrots and the lights jerked from a white glare to a lurid competition between helio and red. The soldier held her firmly against his sporran, for reasons best known to himself not shoving it to one side. He smelled of sweat and hot wool. There was the time and the tempo for conversation. His voice had a husky quality, deep with it, which might come from too much smoking.

'What's yer name?'

'Mary Wood.'

'Ah'm Geordie Smith.'

'Hiya Geordie.'

'Hiya Mary.'

There was then silence again while they danced. It was hot enough in the hall but next to the soldier the temperature soared higher. He radiated heat, his face flushed with it, sweat beading his forehead. A trickle ran down his cheek.

'Why do you wear those shirts in the summer?' she asked.

'Eh? Regulation.'

'A daft regulation if you ask me.'

'It's a regimental regulation and that's enough for me.'

'Are you daft on being a soldier then?'

'I'm no daft on it, I'm just one, that's all.'

He didn't smile, Mary hadn't seen him do that. He danced well, his heavy boots always avoiding her pointed slippers, but there was a tension, too, in his movement, almost as though this was something he had trained for. He concentrated on it, with a slight wrinkling of a damp forehead.

'What do you do here, Mary?'

'Household help.'

'You mean a skivvy?'

'I do not. I go in my own time.'

'What do they pay you?'

'Three bob an hour.'

'That's no bad. It's better than a sodjer. If you stick at it.'

'Anything's better than a soldier.'

'Ach, to hell. We get good money now.'

He told her about that, beer fumes wafting in her face. She didn't mind. She didn't mind his stiff dancing, either, and his solemnity.

'Are you marrit, Mary?'

'No. What about you?'

'I was. She walked oot when I was in Cyprus. I got a divorce.'

'You what? Didn't that cost a terrible lot?'

'Och, no, you get it on the government. And the regiment fixed it. I just signed the papers.'

'So you're a free man, eh? No wains?'

'Wains? See ma Jessie havin' a baby! She was aye for the dancin' and the men. Divorce was easy. Plenty of evidence.'

'It's hard on the girls when their men's off.'

'So what? What about the men, eh? You wouldn't call Cyprus fun, not when I was there. Nor Malaya neither.'

'You get around, Geordie.'

'Aye.'

The music stopped but Geordie didn't desert her. There was now a slight breaking down of the segregation of the sexes but the soldier was still one of the few males on the women's side of the hall. He sat on a flimsy chair mopping his face.

'We'll go the next, ch, Mary ?'

'I don't mind.'

But she had the sudden sharp feeling then that Geordie had been tipped off, that one of the local boys had given him a direct lead to her. She knew well enough this could happen, part of some male huddle by the door and a general sniggering. She stiffened a little on her chair, a kind of veneer of primness quickly applied in imitation of a gentility which had never come easily to her. She was angry, briefly, at the men and their talk, until the music started again, this time the beat of jive which reached out and pushed through a sudden and uneasy reserve. Geordie was looking at her, still without smiling. She found his solemnity in some way endearing, though it might be that he had bad teeth.

'Well?' said Geordie. 'What about it?'

'Okay.'

They rose. Jive in a kilt and army boots might seem impracticable but it wasn't. Geordie moved with a curious lightness now which suggested a sword dancer, his eyes often on Mary's face, those blue eyes keeping their hard wariness always. He swung her round, pushed her away, drew her to him, all the time their feet weaving, and when their hot hands weren't clasped they clapped. The band achieved a kind of barbaric frenzy which was not all importation, as though in this wild beat there was a kinship with older Scottish tribal practice, before the dances of the people had become emasculated in a formality imposed by the contemporary ballet influence. The Kilrudderie jive session offered its own comment on the castrated prettiness of country dancing in its television export version. Here they still thumped and sweated in a roasting and smelly hall.

'How ya doin'?' Geordie asked.

'No bad.'

The vibrations kept her breasts shivering. Geordie was looking at them. Suddenly he grinned. His teeth were all right, white in a weather darkened face.

Mary didn't care then if he had been tipped off. She wanted him watching her.

They went out for air after about three-quarters of an hour, Mary leaning back against the cool stone of the Town Hall's outside wall. No one had cut in on the soldier. She knew the talk had started, the girls would be looking at her when she went back in, the men con-

triving not to. She didn't mind. She reached out for Geordie's hand and took it, looking up at the side of his head, the somehow blunt profile with its short, flared nose.

'I could do with a beer,' he said.

'The pubs is shut.'

'Do you think I don't know?'

'We could go to the Italian's.'

'No. I'm for up the road.'

He looked at her then, forcing it a little, not afraid to do that. He was holding her hand hard.

'Well?' he asked slowly.

'All right,' Mary said, very low.

He let go her hand.

'Let's get going then.'

'Wait! There's folk comin' out the hall.'

He waited, impatient, while shrill laughter eddied about them and then trailed away up the High Street. There was no traffic, just a stillness of solemn houses and closed shops beyond the thumping of which they were still a part. Most of the town slept.

'Come on,' he said, starting off.

She didn't follow at once, waiting for a kind of privacy in which to do that, watching him move into the shadow beyond a lamp standard. Then she pushed herself away from the cool stone, half running. He caught her hand again when she reached him.

'You're all right,' he said.

She knew he was grinning. They turned towards almost complete darkness, into a lane, going down it, their feet noisy.

'Where the hell's this, Mary? I'm no to be too far from the bus.'

'It's all right!'

The country tucked itself about Kilrudderie still, coming down in places to the old high walls of gardens. They walked on the back road over the hill, with fields on both sides suddenly, and trimmed beach hedges.

'Will this no do?' Geordie asked.

'Aye. There's a gate up there.'

He laughed.

'You know where you're goin', Mary.'

They climbed over the gate, Geordie first. As Mary came down from it, he caught her. There were no preliminaries beyond his

mouth on hers, no fumbling, none needed with the convenience of the kilt.

She lay on the hard, ridged ground of the field, bearing his weight.

'You're all right,' Geordie said.

'It's time for your bus.'

'To hell, I'll walk.'

She smiled, holding him, glad he had said that.

'To Perth?'

'Aye, why not?'

'You wouldn't be there for reveille.'

'You ken a lot aboot sodjers, don't you?'

'Aye,' she said with a flat honesty. 'Do you mind?'

'Can't say I do, right now. Mind you. . . .'

'What, Geordie?'

'I like ma women to mascl'. You see?'

'Aye, I see. I will be. I'm like that.'

'Are you, Mary? You came damn' easy.'

'Aye, wi' you.'

He lay still, thinking about that.

'The boys said I might make it.'

'Damn them!'

He stirred, lifting himself, looking at her face in a pale glimmer of moon from behind cloud.

'You're greetin',' he said, astonished. 'Mary, you're no to do that.'

When he kissed her again, for the first time gently, she felt she couldn't endure it.

'Geordie! Go to your bus. You'll be late. Don't be a fool. Go to your bus.'

'What about you?'

'I'll go home, that's all. I'm goin' to my bed.'

'Pity I'm no with you.'

'Geordie go now, please!'

He stood up, brushing down his kilt with his hands, looking at her.

'I'll be back next Saturday to the dancin'.'

'All right. Hurry!'

She heard his boots on the road, clattering, a sound like metal against metal, echoing towards the dark houses. She pulled herself half up, against the grass bank under the hedge, leaning on it,

suddenly utterly weary and in a kind of pain she didn't understand. She put her hands over her face, holding them there.

When Mary finally got up she did so like an old woman, reaching out for branches in the hedge. The gate took her a long time and then she was in the road, the moon still screened, only a dull gleam on the metalled surface. Just below her the old town was silhouetted in the yellow glare from its main street lighting, the buildings like jagged pinnacles of rock going up to the summits of their chimneys. In the valley a freight train hooted, but so distantly it wasn't part of this at all.

She went down the road slowly, with an overpowering feeling of being solitary, alone in a night that had somehow become static and in which the movement she made was strangely opposed to the controlling force.

She chose the back way home, the old lanes, avoiding the High Street. In them the darkness was only occasionally blurred by an isolated gas lamp, a greenish flickering that was senile and ineffective. She walked with a sense of the town closed down about her, the last bus gone, and windows dark against the night.

Now and then she put out a hand to touch a stone wall, needing contact with something, anything to counteract the sense of isolation that was new to her, the pain she didn't quite identify as physical, but which burned. The thought of Geordie was in that pain, looming through it. She could see his eyes on her, hard blue, the eyes of a man who had sent his wife packing for what she was doing. It was all right for the man to do it and then run for his bus. She had told him to go, wanting him away, needing then to be alone with something she didn't understand.

Mary stopped in the dark, putting both hands against the stone and her cheek on them, her head turned sideways.

'Geordie,' she said out loud.

Then she was quiet against the wall, not moving.

Down the lane something moved. There was an arch where a house spanned it, the mouth of the arch dimly lit from its far entrance. Something moved out of the shadow, the shape of a man, tall, and she saw it at first numb to any reaction, just watching. The figure took a few steps towards her, doubtfully, as though she had been seen and waited for and her sudden disappearance was a mystery. Then he came quickly, coming for her!

Mary turned and ran, back up the lane. It echoed to running feet, hers and the man's. She wanted to cry out, but couldn't.

'Mary!'

She stopped almost under one of the lamps, turning slowly, staring at her brother. He was wearing old clothes and a cap pulled down over his face, but she could see it, his mouth and nose if not his eyes.

'What were you doin' stoppin' in the lane like that?'

'You . . . saw me?'

'Aye, I saw you. I was waiting for you to come by.'

'Tammy! What are you doing here at this time?'

'I might ask you, you bitch!'

'You cut that out, see. You cut it out!'

'Och, sure. I ken fine you was at the dancin'. And you went off wi' a sodjer.'

She hit him across the face with the back of her hand. For a moment he was a small boy, stopped by that, by the thing he had only got from her sometimes. Then he stepped towards her, his hands fists, both raised.

'Don't think you can do that to me any more. Don't think it, Mary.'

'Oh, Tammy, I'm sorry. It's what you said.'

'You get home. Go to your bed. You've not seen me this night. Not anywhere. Get that?'

'But why?'

'Never you mind. Now get away!'

'Tammy, you're up to somethin'. Listen to me. You're on probation. You know what it'll mean. . . .'

'Shut yer mouth!'

'Tammy, you're a fool! You can't. . . .'

'I said get away. Quick. And you watch yersel'. What you say. Ma's had about enough o' you and your carryin' on. She'll pit you oot this time, if she kens aboot the sodjer. You and the bairns. Oot in the road. That's what you'll get. So no blabbin'.'

She stared at her brother, trying to reach for those reserves of strength that would serve her. In her way she had been able to control Tammy, the only one in the house to do that. But she knew now that her power over him was gone, that she couldn't deal with this alone. She had to get help, and quickly.

Vivian had a dream which recurred and was a kind of comfort, instantly recognized and accepted, something she could move into without the threat of strangeness, because the dream's pattern was set and established. She was a girl again, in the house in Edinburgh with her sister, and everything about her was easy and familiar, the reassuring certainties of immovable detail, the furnishings where they should be, never changed. Her mother was in it, too, fixed as a kind of immortal in her fifties, a calm, detached woman who organized each day in a tight, contained circle of detail into which intruded no violence and very little from beyond walls and garden. It was summer in Vivian's dream, with the sun shining, and sometimes from the pleasure it gave her she turned in her sleep and made little noises.

She turned in her sleep now, but in protest, half angry, dragged back from the dream. At a great distance was the sound of a phone bell and she said something to John in a kind of petulance before she became dimly conscious that he was gone from the bed. The ringing of the phone at night wasn't her business, but John's. She accepted that, and when the noise stopped, turned over on her stomach, relaxing again, her face almost flat into the pillow.

She woke when the short summer night was almost over, the big windows showing a sky blown clear of yesterday's cloud by wind. Wind creaked outside in the manse trees.

Vivian sat up. There was enough of the grey, streaky light in the room to let her see the travelling clock. It said three-twenty. John was gone. She looked for his clothes and they weren't there.

Irritated she reached for a packet of the cigarettes she had started to use again, finding them, with matches, in a drawer of the bedside table. She had little hoards of cigarettes like this about the house now, as though, reprieved from her penance, she wanted this indulgence always to hand, little packets of ten in the kitchen and the sitting-room and here, ready for her.

She lit the cigarette, feeling slightly sick suddenly.

It would be one of John's old women. He always had a batch of these standing on the threshold of death for about ten years, with half a dozen false alarms in the period, and they called him up sometimes even before the doctor. He never failed to go out to them, even, at two and three in the morning.

Vivian got up and put on a dressing-gown, going over to the window. It was almost warm, the wind from the west bringing that

warmth in from the Atlantic and the Gulf Stream. The garden beneath her, only half defined still, had because of this a remoteness, and she looked down at the skeletal design of her own work, the masses blocked out by shadow, but the straight lines of lawn and path drawn with a mathematical precision. It was too early yet for the birds, but the snails would be out, climbing the new, still tender stalks of delphinium, a thousand snails busy in the dew.

She hated them and warred against them with an almost sadistic pleasure, going out after rain with a bucket of salt water to pluck the shelled brutes from their herbaceous meals and pop them into slow death. This wouldn't be a bad time for another attack, but somehow the thought of the massive house, still dark, daunted her.

Vivian was conscious of the house when John was away, of the useless rooms, some of them sketchily furnished, and all of them from sales. There wasn't a room that really pleased her, for in each she saw compromise with her ideas and plans, something imposed by poverty. The bathroom was an antique and, whatever John might say, if she won a prize on her Premium Bonds she was going to have it torn out, watching with glee each relic of Victorian plumbing dumped on a tradesman's cart. The replacement would have low fittings and gleaming walls, and be a seven days' wonder in Kilrudderie. 'Have you seen the new bathroom at the manse?'

It was a daydream to match the night one.

A sound in the lower hall made her swing around, a thump. She went quickly over to the door and stood by it, one hand on the knob, the other on the key. It was an instinctive reaction, prompted by sudden, pounding fear. But she didn't turn the key, she very slowly opened the door.

There was a light down there. Then John's voice.

'Thank you very much indeed. I'm most grateful. More than I can say.'

He sounded odd. She didn't recognize the other man.

'Are you sure I should leave you, Mr. McCall? You're really all right?'

'Fine. Fine. I'll get back to bed.'

'I wish you'd let me call the doctor.'

'No, no, not at all.'

Vivian flew to the banisters then.

'John! What is it?'

She ran down the stairs. John and Jock Innis were standing almost under the light looking up at her.

'I'm glad you're here, Mrs. McCall,' Jock Innis said. 'I'm afraid there has been a little accident. At least . . .'

'I'm fine now,' John was almost belligerent. 'There's no need to make a fuss.'

'What happened?' Vivian called out, looking straight at the young man.

Even through her own flurry of panic she saw that he was uneasy. He stood there in the manse hall like someone wishing to get away as quickly as possible, almost as though he didn't want to be identified with this situation. There was the same eagerness in John to gloss it over.

Then she saw blood, on her husband's hair just above one ear. It was clotted.

'John! You're hurt!'

'That's what I think, Mrs. McCall. I tried to insist on the doctor....'

But she was sure somehow he hadn't.

'John, where were you tonight? What have you been doing?'

'I'll tell you in a moment, Vivian. And now I've kept Mr. Innis for long enough. He . . . ah . . . saw me home.'

'From where? Do you mean he found you?'

'Yes, Mrs. McCall. In Carter's Lane actually. I was going through it. Odd time of night to be about, I know, but I'd run out of cigarettes. I came down into the town to get some from a machine.'

What was he talking about cigarettes for, the fool!

'You found him?'

'Mr. McCall was . . . unconscious.'

'Stunned, Vivian, that's all.'

She took a deep breath to steady herself against fear and a portion of anger, too. It was idiocy this going out late at night on these missions, she'd told him often enough. He got no thanks for it, people just took it as their right with the Minister. And now this! He'd been hurt!

'I'll make tea,' she said, her voice calm under an imposed control. 'You'll have a cup, Mr. Innis?'

'No, really. I ought to be getting back.'

Again Vivian had the feeling that he was acutely embarrassed, a normally self-possessed young man who had somehow been caught

outside his own neat planning. She knew enough about him to have heard a good deal of the planning, and the changes he was bringing both for himself and others in the town. In a place like Kilmallock what were supposed to be business secrets soon sent ripples of rumours away from the core of their origin. The management of Scotsroofs couldn't really expect much more privacy than the manse.

Jock Innis had backed to the door, looking at John, something uncomfortable in that look.

'You're sure you don't want me to notify the police, Mr. McCall?'

'No, no, certainly not. I'll be obliged, too, if you don't mention this.'

'Why not?' Vivian called out. 'John . . . were you attacked?'

'I'll explain, dear, I'll explain.'

Jock Innis smiled briefly. Then he pulled open the door. Vivian heard the wind for just a second before it shut again and he was gone.

'You'd better explain!' she said angrily to John.

'I'll sit down first. I'd like that tea.'

'What about your head?' Her voice was cold. 'Don't you want a dressing on it? You look like you'd been . . . coshed.'

He turned away and opened the sitting-room door.

'I'll put on the heater. I feel a bit shivery.'

'Why not go to bed? I'll bring up the tea.'

'I'd like to sit up for a little.'

She sensed his tension then, knowing that there was some kind of battle going on in his mind, one of those times when he carefully shut her out. He wanted her to go away and make tea while he sat down and stared at a bar of electricity coming to life.

'Very well,' she said.

In the kitchen she did what she had to steadily enough. She prepared a tray and put a small first aid box on it. Also a tin of biscuits. Then she carried it through.

John was sitting a little bent over in his chair. There was one light on, a silver-based table lamp that had been a wedding present, and even in the feeble light from a tinted shade she could see how pale he was. She poured tea and put a lot of sugar in it, handing over the cup, still cut off from him by his wish, and, for all her fears, resenting that. It kept her stiff and by herself, sitting waiting, watching him sipping at the cup.

'That's better,' John said after a little.

'Who hit you in Carter's Lane?'

He didn't look at her.

'I . . . don't know.'

He wasn't a good liar. When he did lie to her, as happened occasionally in what he felt was the line of his duty, there was always this hesitation, sometimes slight but there, as though he was rebuked even as he took the step. She didn't challenge the falsehood, but the coldness stayed in her voice.

'Why were you in Carter's Lane at that time? Is that the way to any of your old ladies?'

'It could be,' he told her, sipping again.

'But it doesn't happen to be at the moment, John. Remember, I know them all. Want me to go over the list of people likely to get you out at two in the morning?'

'No!'

'It wasn't one of them, this time, was it? You weren't called by one of your usuals?'

He looked at her. She could see that he was forcing himself to do it.

'Vivian, I don't like to have to ask this of you, but I must. Something happened tonight which I don't want talked about in this town. It's extremely important that it shouldn't be. Someone's whole future could depend on it.'

'Oh. And I might talk to the postman, is that it?'

'Please don't misunderstand me! I haven't got this thing straight in my own mind yet. I don't know what I'm going to do.'

'By which you mean you haven't decided yet whether to report this to the police?'

'No, I haven't. I may not.'

'Someone hit you over the head, in a dark lane. And you're not going to report it? John . . . what do you think you are in this town?'

'I don't know,' he said.

'Well, I do! You're the Minister. You're paid very little to do a certain job. But that job doesn't mean responsibility for everything that happens in this place. You've no right to judge, or to withhold information. The police ought to come into this.'

'I've told you, I haven't made up my mind yet.'

Vivian put down her own cup.

'I think I ought to put sticking-plaster on your head.'

'The cut's nothing. I don't want anything on it. It would be noticed in church.'

'You'll be in your bed, you won't be taking services.'

'I shall certainly be taking the morning and evening services just as usual. There is no one else who could do it. And I'll be perfectly all right after a few hours' sleep.'

She stood, jerking herself out of her chair.

'Very well, I'll go back to bed. Since you're perfectly fit. The bleeding has stopped, has it?'

'Oh, yes, it wasn't much.'

Vivian crossed the room. She couldn't resist the childish gesture of slamming the door behind her. There was a burning in her eyes, but she wasn't going to cry. On the stairs, going up them, she said a kind of imprecation against all holy men, over and over, not letting it be touched by any strong words, but there as a feeble incantation of fury. She got back into bed, pulling up the chilled covers, and lay on her side, waiting.

In about half an hour he came up. Vivian listened to her husband's movements in undressing, always slow and deliberate, the little clink as he put his gold pocket watch on the chest of drawers and the curious small sigh of his breath as he pulled on his pyjamas.

The bed creaked, the aged springs suddenly elevating her on to a hillock above the well-worn valley which held him. Again he made the sound which might have been a sigh, and she knew he was lying on his back, staring up at a ceiling on which the dawn would soon be putting patterns of colour.

By seven-thirty Vivian was down in the kitchen. Sunday was always an early morning, with its peculiar restraints, John breakfasting soon after eight, absorbed, a little oppressed it seemed to her sometimes, by what had to come. Today he was sleeping.

She knew the exact moment when sleep had taken him, getting on for five, with the first birdsong starting. She had been lying very still, half wanting him to say something that would break down the barrier they had both built, but he hadn't. She heard the deepening of his breath and then the first little snort of a snore. After that came a steady chorus of them, never very loud but enough to keep her from sleep if she wasn't near it herself. Normally she would have made him turn on his side, giving him a little prod as a cue to do that, and he nearly always responded, half conscious, but still observing the etiquette of a shared bed, something built up over twenty-three years. This time she had lain enduring the sound, hugging her bitterness as a kind of luxury rarely indulged completely. Now she had the excuse to do that, and to rise tired after it, still angry.

Even in summer the manse kitchen retained a kind of cold inconvenience, the big range out for economy and the immersion heater only used three times a week for baths. Vivian stirred the porridge slowly on a gas cooker, the tiresome ritual of making it from rough oats part of her continuing anger.

When the front door bell rang she was disconcerted, this something utterly unexpected on a Sunday. She turned the gas very low, and went down the hall wiping her hands on an apron. She didn't take the apron off.

For just a moment Vivian didn't recognize the girl standing there, a round face puffed out about the eyes from weeping.

'I'm sorry to bother you, Mrs. McCall. I'm real sorry. But I have to see the Minister. It's important like.'

'What do you want, Miss Wood?'

She refused to call the girl Mary, staying apart from her in formality and a kind of distaste.

'I've just got to see him, that's all.'

'About last night?'

That came quickly, almost instinctive.

'Aye.'

'You can see me about it. Come in.'

Vivian had never thought of herself as in any way intimidating, but now she was conscious of the armour of her anger making her stern. She looked at the girl without any softening, walking ahead of her into the hall, and opening the sitting-room door.

The place had the feel of something kept closed after use, a kind of musty chill. Vivian didn't put on the heater. She didn't sit, either, or offer the girl a chair, turning with hands touching the edge of a table which had a blush of blue damp on the sheen of mahogany.

'Did you have anything to do with what happened to my husband last night?'

Mary Wood was inside the room, but only just, with the door to the hall opened behind her. Her hands clutched a small bag which she must have snatched up in coming out, and to which she clung now as though it held treasure. It seemed to Vivian a little astonishing that men, even men wanting just that one thing, should find this creature attractive.

'I phoned him,' Mary said.

'About what?'

There was a certain pleasure in feeling in complete control of a situation, something almost new, a sensation with a little tingle of power.

'I . . . I had to get help. The Minister was the only one I could think of. I wasn't myself, you see. I mean . . . I wouldn't have got him into that if I'd been myself. You understand?'

'No,' Vivian said, with crisp coldness.

'Well, it was . . . Tammy.'

'Your brother? He's on probation for a robbery, isn't he?'

'Aye. He was goin' to do another. I found him at it. He wouldn't listen to me, Mrs. McCall. I was hopin' the Minister . . .'

'You phoned my husband. What did you do then?'

'He told me to go home. Mr. McCall did. He said I was to go right home, and leave things to him.'

'And when he got to Carter's Lane your brother hit him on the head?'

'It must be,' Mary said, and began to weep.

She stood there looking overpowered, the hussy who had borne four children to men who had come casually into her life and then gone out of it again. She had been brazen enough about that, living it out in this town where everyone knew what she was up to. But something had brought her low now.

'Where is your brother?'

'I don't know, I just don't know. He never came home at all. My mother's fair demented.'

'Not for the first time, I should imagine.'

That seemed to spark a reaction. Mary Wood stiffened a little and looked at the Minister's wife as though she was really seeing her for the first time. Something shadowed in her eyes shook Vivian's confidence, just a little. She was no longer so completely in control. It was unnerving to feel that the town slut could in some way be challenging, that her humility was for one thing but not her whole life.

'I want to see the Minister,' Mary said, using her slight first advantage.

'You can't. He's sleeping. He needs it, and I'm not going to wake him until it's nearly time for the service. You can tell me anything you want him to know.'

'I've . . . went to the police.'

That caught Vivian completely by surprise.

'You've what?'

'Aye, I've just been. They'll be oot lookin' for Tammy now. And whoever was with him. He wasn't alone, I know that. There was someone there. He may have been the one that hit the Minister. . . .'

'Is that what you hope?'

'I can't but hope it. He's my brother, isn't he? I never thought this would happen when I called the Minister. How could I? I never thought Tammy would do a thing like that. It'll be the jail for him right enough now. The police'll nab him today, I know it.'

'Does your mother know you've been to the police?'

'No. I'm going back to tell her now.'

Somehow Vivian had to acknowledge courage then. She remembered Mary's mother, a slack tongue in a slack body, and violent furies from all accounts. Tammy was her ewe lamb. The storm would descend on Mary Wood, pouring over her, and yet she had gone to the police. She hadn't come here whimpering to John, asking for his mercy to keep quiet about her brother.

John's mercy wasn't called for. The gesture of it he had been going to make was snatched from him by this girl. Vivian knew that in a way she ought to be grateful to Mary Wood. And then suddenly she thought of something else, something almost frightening.

'Miss Wood . . . if you went straight home, how did you know what happened in Carter's Lane?'

'I . . . I could guess. From what I heard in the toon. I was out early for baps. My Ma must aye hae them in the morning. She didn't know then Tammy wasn't in. She shouted at me to get out for the baps and I just went. They was talkin' in the bakery. Willie Begg saw them, as he was goin' on the early shift to the railway.'

'He saw who?' Vivian asked, though she knew only too well from twenty years in Kilrudderie.

'He saw the Minister and Mr. Innis. He must have hid like to let them come by. He heard Mr. Innis ask about the Minister's head, and how it must have been a terrible clout. The Minister was leanin' on Mr. Innis, Willie said.'

At least they wouldn't be able to say that John was drunk, since Willie Begg had eavesdropped so completely. They would be deprived by his story of that much more interesting version of events.

But John was a fool, exposing himself like this. He always had been, exceeding his role, trying to play God.

Vivian stopped herself then, on the fringe of taboo heresies, of thoughts not put into words in the mind. She thought instead of John mounting the pulpit to one of the largest congregations he'd had in years; everyone who could be there to see what the Minister looked like after a cosh attack.

So much for his good deed, for the held silence he had intended to spare a nasty ruffian. Instead the story was splattered over the town with the morning rolls.

'You came to tell my husband that you'd been to the police?'

'Aye. In case he was goin' to keep it back, like.'

'Did you ask him to do that?'

'No! I just asked for his help, that's all. I'm sorry. I'm ever so sorry.'

Vivian was silent, facing humiliation. They had only their dignity really, here in the manse, nothing much else to live on. Without this their position was a joke. It might have become that joke now, a silly man out in the middle of the night bent on his good deed that should

have been left to the police. Her anger against John, a little worn by the length of time she had maintained it, hardened again.

'I'll tell my husband,' Vivian said, in a grim dismissal.

She walked with the girl to the front door, standing in it to see Mary Wood go down the short drive to the iron-barred gates of the manse, one of which always stood open. Mary was going home to scenes and shouting, to real trouble. Vivian couldn't care. She watched the girl disappear wondering suddenly why Mary had been prowling the back lanes alone late at night. You didn't have to look far for the answer.

The porridge was burned in the pot, with a thick loathsome scum on it. Vivian put the pan to steep in the sink and started in all over again, bringing fresh water to boil and measuring the meal in her hand.

'Don't bother this morning,' John said from the doorway.

She swung round. He was in his black suit, and neatly shaved. The side of his head was washed and still damp, no sign of blood now. He looked as composed as he always tried to do for this day, but a little pale still.

'What will you eat?' Vivian asked.

'Oh, cornflakes or something. It doesn't matter. I thought I heard voices just now when I was in the bathroom.'

'Yes, Mary Wood.'

His head jerked up.

'Why didn't you tell me?'

'I thought you were asleep.'

She was almost enjoying his uneasiness, quite ready to prolong it.

'What did Mary want?'

She could see how nervous he was suddenly.

'She only came to say that she had been to the police. About her brother.'

John pulled out a chair and sat on it, as though he needed to. He avoided looking at her.

'You may as well tell me what's happened, Vivian.'

'The story is out in the town. About you trying to save Tammy Wood from himself, or whatever you'd call it. You were seen with Jock Innis. I don't know how you could have imagined you wouldn't be. Isn't everything seen in this town? John, how could you be such a fool?'

He picked up a spoon and stared at it.

'I was going to tell you this morning,' he said. 'I woke up knowing I had to do that.'

'It's easy to say now!'

'It still happens to be the truth.'

'You lied to me last night and you talk about the truth this morning. Is that because it's Sunday?'

He didn't answer. She felt justified in her bitterness, a kind of righteousness in it. He had shut her out at a moment of crisis, as though she was a domestic not to be alarmed by matters which didn't concern her. Whatever he might say now that was what he had done, and deliberately.

She had a sudden urge to feed him, to make a duty of this. If he hadn't his porridge he must have an egg. She got one out and popped it into the boiling water, standing with her back to him.

When the bell rang Vivian said over her shoulder.

'I expect it's the police. Hadn't you better go?'

His chair scraped back. Listening she heard him tell Sergeant Alison to come into the sitting-room. The Sergeant was a slow man, with a kind of plodding solemnity about his duty and he would take his time. She might as well eat this egg herself.

The egg sat in its cup with the top off but she couldn't swallow. Vivian was already hearing the church bells starting to toll, with the trickles of congregation coming from the four corners of the town, swelling into a positive stream at the gates, all of them clutching hymn books and wearing expressions of bright anticipation not usual with this duty. There would be a full turn-out all right, old ladies like Miss Beale managing to avoid dizzy spells this morning in order to occupy their pews. She could see Miss Beale boxed in the seat which had borne her family name for nearly two hundred years, sitting as she always did with her hands on the silver knob of her black umbrella. The umbrella was a more interesting relic than most of Miss Beale's alleged antiques, with a long ebony handle, and she used it in church, shoving herself erect on a point dug into coconut matting, when she decided to acknowledge the singing with this courtesy. Even the Voluntary would have an unusual sprightliness today, the organist responding as she always did to an occasion, probably with Handel for rejoicing.

Vivian had an allergy to Handel, from her frequent inoculations,

with the unbearable tedium of the *Messiah* an annual event during the winter months, a professional male and female in the leading roles, supported by a self-conscious block of the local Choral Union. She and John were forced into front seats always and though he managed a look of charmed appreciation, for her it was an agony, an effort to keep an expression of extreme pain from creeping on to her face. It had always seemed to Vivian almost unbelievable that so many people could want to use one word so often, an excruciating harmonic dissection. The same soprano had been coming for fifteen years and she sang like a somnambulist in a beatific trance.

It was ten past ten when the Sergeant finally went. John came into the kitchen looking strained.

'Well, have they caught Tammy?'

'Not yet. But they think he got a lift on a lorry to Perth.'

'I suppose this means you'll be the star turn at the trial?'

'I'll have to appear, yes.'

'I've just made fresh tea. Can I do you an egg?'

'No, no, I haven't time. You'll have to hurry, Vivian, if you're going to be ready for church.'

She waited a moment, standing at the sink, and then said:

'I'm not coming this morning.'

There was no sound at all from him, except the clink of the teapot spout against a cup. She turned to see that he wasn't eating anything, just sipping tea.

'John, do you have to go yourself this morning?'

'Of course.'

He avoided looking at her. She was a long distance away and had put herself there, she knew that. But she had to go on with her protest.

'An Elder could take the service. Everyone would understand. You were assaulted last night. Most people would take time off for shock, or whatever it is.'

'I'm perfectly able to take the service.'

'And you want me there as usual in my pew?'

'That's not a decision for me.'

'It's the people staring I can't bear. John, I've told you this before. At the best of times we're sort of exhibits. And now . . . the church will be packed, you know that.'

'It's a thing I'll be glad to see.'

'Oh, I shouldn't have been a minister's wife! You couldn't have married anyone more unsuitable. The years should bring a kind of anæsthetic. But they haven't to me. I hate smiling when I don't feel like it.'

'You're probably right to stay home this morning.'

He stood up, not really looking at her before he left the kitchen. She heard him going down the passage and into his study, closing the door carefully, in his retreat for his quiet time when he probably asked his God to deal with the current situation. The packed church was an opportunity not to be missed and perhaps he felt he had one of his better sermons to give them, that the knock on his head had brought a kind of enlightenment.

Vivian was in their bedroom when the bells began, knowing that John wouldn't return to it. She was in her morning dress with the apron over it, standing looking at her white face in the long mirror of the wardrobe. The front door closed with the little bang he always gave it.

The manse had no direct access to the churchyard. You had to go out the gate and along past a row of half a dozen old houses. Vivian could see him walking along, already meeting the first stares of his parishioners. He would smile at them as though on a week-day, for he never composed his expression into a becoming solemnity for his duties in the parish. He might even meet an Elder who was a farmer and talk about the weather for the crops. But he would be alone.

'Damn!' she said out loud to the mirror.

Then she reached out and wrenched open the wardrobe door, snatching a dress off a hanger. For the first time this season she would wear her summer hat into the manse pew.

Elsie Garr had a small portable radio she had bought in Kilrudderie playing in the kitchen. It was sunny outside but she rarely went out in the mornings, making of them little pools of privacy in this house she no longer hated. It was her house now with its tiny rooms and she had moved through it with a curious concentration, changing it into that, leaving nothing as it had been, the furniture pushed about and thinned, a lot of it away to a junk dealer. Her father's clothes were away, too, nothing that had been intimate to him left where her eye could come on it suddenly.

She slept upstairs again, on a new mattress, and that was where she took Jock, or where he came to her without using lights. The house had been converted to their need for it, suddenly personal to them.

Elsie had a feeling of triumph over the town which had opened its door just a little way. She had put her foot in the opening and pushed. She was inside now, even accepted, and when she went into a shop not all the women stared, as though the neat, surface circumspection of everything she did had slowly drained away their interest. She went to the pictures sometimes, on her own, but not minding that, and had stood more than once in a queue for fish and chips at Tomelli's. A small town had its kind of tolerance, too, restraining judgment in the face of withdrawal and discretion.

And they had been discreet enough. Jock didn't have to be told here in Kilmallock. He made of each visit to her a minor campaign of planning, telling her about it, how he never used the same streets in approaching her house. He had even come over a back wall from a derelict property which adjoined the cemented square her father had chosen instead of a tiny garden. Jock came late and with his own key, and it was enough for her just to be waiting. She didn't look to a future at all, or plan for it, holding the present with a kind of greediness.

She enjoyed these mornings to herself, taking pleasure from cleaning and polishing, as though the routine of caring for a house offered pleasures of a kind long overlooked. She was even teaching herself to bake, from a cook book, and had achieved a light, floury scone which rose well in the slow heat of the range oven.

The radio offered no reminder of Sunday—dance music, the faint nostalgia of remembered tunes. There was one she had sung and she stood listening suddenly, remembering how she used it for a fortnight at a supper club. It was before Jock had come into her dressing-room.

The tune had a kind of rating in her mind, of its effectiveness, and the reaction in applause. It wasn't really a song to be played lightly like this, but should be belted over, beaten out in a tension held from the slow rhythm. With this song she had made men stop sawing their steaks and reach out for wine glasses, their eyes lifting and staying on her. There was a peculiar and endless competition with food in a supper club, dishes made to rattle by peevish waiters, as though the floor show and the prices paid to entertainers irritated them. She remembered one man with a hoarse, croaking whisper

which invariably sounded out as the lights dimmed for her . . . 'French beans, sir?'

You had your work cut out all right. It was good training.

The thought of her training made Elsie smile, and she began to move her duster again, going to the mantelpiece which now held only one low bowl of nasturtiums plucked from the clump by the door which came up every year unattended. She was no longer cut off from her old life by the accident of what had happened to her; somehow that was softened away, and she felt now that her return to Kilmuirie had been no sudden impulse, as though she had come because she had sensed what waited for her here. Probably she had always known, really, that here she would meet Jock again, and her heart and body had gone on wanting that, beyond all bitterness.

The bitterness, too, was shadowy, a phase from which she had escaped, something recalled with a kind of pity for time wasted. Her complete isolation from the people in this town, with the possible exception of Morag, was now maintained deliberately as a kind of defence. She didn't want interest or concern in her affairs, anxious to reduce this to the absolute minimum.

The Minister had seen her wish here. He had never been back after his abortive attempt to push her into the public eye, that weirdly conceived cure for her state which hadn't been what she needed at all. Elsie felt a little sorry for John McCall, for the imperatives which drove him to these attempts to find solutions for the living of people nominally under his charge. He went about this duty with a kind of desperate good faith which was honest and from this appealing. She felt that if he came to her one afternoon she would give him tea and try to let him see that she was no longer one of the problems on that list which must always be in his mind. He could score one off, at least.

She was smiling when Morag walked into the house without using the knocker.

Morag was in navy-blue, a long, puffed out tube of it which stretched from half-way down her calves up to a genteelly collared neck. Pulled down over her bun, with the brim shaped as a kind of awful accent on a round face, was a hat for the Sabbath, relieved only by a small, forward-lurching bunch of heirloom cherries set against one improbable green leaf.

'I've been to the kirk,' Morag announced loudly, still breathless

from this extreme of pious observance. 'You'll never guess. You been oot the hoose the day?'

'No.'

'Aye, I thocht not. My goodness! Are you makin' tea?'

'I wasn't.'

'Well, I could dae wi' a cup, I can tell you. There was the Minister as though nothin' had happened, ye ken. Him following the Beadle up into the pulpit. Mind you, you could see he was a bit wobbly. And his face still pale like. It wusnae the lighting. It's the shock hengin' on. But I'll say this for him, he'd the guts to go through wi' it. There's many a man in his boots would have left things to an Elder this day. They're all sayin' that. Giein' him full marks, ye ken. The place was packed oot. I could scarcely get in ma pew. Mind you, not that it's really ma pew these days. I havenae been paid up like since ma man went. Did you ken the Minister was coshed last night?'

'What?'

Elsie had been half prepared by that entrance for another of Morag's little bombs. The woman was an old-fashioned anarchist at heart; she liked destruction for its own sake, the explosion and then the frozen horror left by it. Her eyes were alert now, bright and alive.

'Aye, he was lying unconscious when Jock Innis found him. Two in the morning it would be, in Carter's Lane. It was Jock Innis that took him back to the manse. And a queer like thing that. He was oot for cigarettes, he says.'

Elsie turned then to routine. She filled a pot from the kettle steaming on the hob, rinsed it carefully and took it to the sink.

'Why shouldn't he be out for cigarettes?' she asked, with her back to Morag.

There was a heavy whistle of indrawn breath.

'Well, I daresay there's no reason. But you might say it was a funny thing to make a habit o' it.'

Elsie knew the need for extreme caution then.

'Does Mr. Innis make a habit of it, Morag?'

'So it would seem. Or that's what the policeman says. Harris, that new man from Fife. He's met Mr. Innis out in the wee hours for cigarettes afore this. They've had a chat like, you see. Seems Jock Innis has turned into a night walker.'

Morag laughed then. Elsie took down the caddy and put in tea.

She brought back the pot to the stove and added the boiling water carefully, her hand steady. Morag was watching.

It was easy to see the way the wind was blowing again. You didn't close the doors and windows and make a private world in Kilrudderie, not for long. Elsie knew that her slowly achieved immunity was not only vulnerable, but might soon be destroyed. She was frightened, horribly frightened, but wouldn't show it.

'Here's your tea, Morag.'

'Are you no for a cup? Are you not needing it?'

Elsie shook her head.

'No, I'm not needing it.'

Then she looked at Morag and smiled, with the feeling that this was the beginning of defiance, her only defence against a wind of talk that would now be rising. It was as though she could already hear the roaring of it in her ears.

HAMISH FAIRWAY-CAMPBELL kept his 1946 Rover at a steady thirty-four and a half miles per hour. It was a speed which got him to his local appointments in reasonable time and was also kind to the old engine, preserving it from the strain which at forty became audible in a muffled knocking from the cylinders. At this speed, too, the car offered a kind of reminiscence of luxury; on a smooth road the body rattles reduced to a minimum, and he could recall without too sharp a consciousness of the years' passage a time when it had been new, part of their comfortable investment in the future.

In those days Hamish had seen the future clearly; there would be a post-war slump which would restore the proper purchasing value of the pound and with his various ploys they would be comfortable, if not opulent. At the back of his mind, never openly stated, had been the feeling that the working classes, in straitened circumstances again, would realize that the world didn't belong to them and as a direct consequence there might soon be a cook in the kitchen at Rosemount. The Rover had in a sense anticipated the inevitable stabilization of social values, a quality car that was at the same time in no way flashy. When he bought it he had planned to trade it in for a new model every three years, reckoning on an annual depreciation of about a hundred and fifty pounds. But the years had brought no hope of that trade-in, years when Britain with its back to the economic wall had somehow contrived to have a quiet little revolution, during which it managed neatly and without any obvious surface pain to eliminate one whole class from an active role in its society.

Hamish belonged to that class and sometimes he thought a violent upheaval would have been better, producing its refugees who packed up the family spoons and with Aunt Emily's pearl necklace fled to British Columbia to live as émigrés. There would at least have been the compensation of a certain drama in that, a challenge instead of this painfully humane nibbling away of a man's security. It was as though the British, with their acutely developed sense of fair play, had carefully preserved their own relics from an unwanted past, seeing that these still got bread even though deprived of cake.

It was ironic, too, that after a spell of Labour in power the people had restored so called Tories to retain the stability of the new socialism. Labour in its turn was withering away, leaving the country in the hands of the new entrepreneur, the socially conscious millionaires now come to strength simply by catering to the vast and ever swelling greed of the general populace. You became the man of power today by making something that twenty million little men wanted to have. Like a Scotsroofs house, or the things that went in it, the plywood furniture, the refrigerators, the food-mixer, or the little pressed-tin car to fit in the restricted garage.

Hamish changed down carefully for the sort of hill that his Rover would once have whispered over in top. His own bid to climb on the bandwagon via the tip from Jock Innis had gone the usual way of his speculations on the market. He had bought Blaehill Trust at ten shillings and a penny to watch them rise to ten and fourpence. Then there had been a flurry of pessimism on Wall Street and Blaehill had at once sunk to eight and nine, slowly creeping up again to nine and twopence, where they sat, putting on halfpennies or dropping them. When Hamish went into the bank now to cash a cheque he avoided looking into the doleful eyes of Hamilton the manager. He was quite certain that Hamilton, seized with an unnatural lust for gambling on hearing a tip from some mysterious horse's mouth, had also plunged in heavily.

Hamish still hadn't told his wife. He had meant to when his new acquisitions were at least comfortable, breaking the news with a small profit that would make it tolerable. Now he couldn't. And sometimes in the mornings it was almost unbearable, for Hester knew the shares he was supposed to own and would read out to him the cosy little advances they had all been making since he sold them.

The grimmest thing of all was that Blaehill were paying an interest of under three per cent and his old holdings had averaged a comfortable five. The drop in income was something that Hester was going to have to know soon. He could see her face when she learned, the shock of surprise first, then her withdrawal. She had always withdrawn from her husband's follies into some private region she kept intact from him. There would be no surface anger or accusations, for on these occasions Hester was aggressively the lady.

The Rover coughed suddenly like an old woman with asthma. He went down to an even lower gear as one of the shiny new monstrosities

with its engine contained in what looked like a breadbox went sailing past him, illegally on a hill, flaunting its reserves of power. Through areas of curved glass Hamish had a glimpse of a beefy young face under a jauntily brimmed felt hat. Then the man waved and was identified as another County Councillor bound on his unpaid duties to the State, a grocer from a town further up the valley who ran a scrap metal business as a sideline. The fellow was a pillar of the Young Unionists Association and on occasion had supported Hamish in protests against Labour extravagance. His car, still obviously in top, disappeared around the bend just above the county town.

The Rover in due course swung into that bend and out of it, with the town suddenly beneath, sprawling across its own small valley, smoky with new enterprise. It was somehow no longer the place Hamish remembered so well, with that lingering air of catering for the rural pattern. Now it had taken a jerk on itself and sat up in the new morning, sending out patterns of suburbs that might have been built by old Will Innis. There were traffic lights where Hamish could remember hedged roads often blocked by creaking carts on the way to market.

He went to the Station Hotel where the cost of lunch would exceed his duty allowance for it, but this was a ritual he wasn't allowing to slip away just yet. He had his whisky, too, in the lobby-lounge, sitting in his usual chair in his country suiting, nodding his head to acquaintances, a crisp-looking if ageing military type who had never publicly acknowledged any direct defeat. He unfolded his paper, which was sober and massive, intending to skip by the financial pages to read about what the Japanese were up to.

But he did pause for just a minute, and then stared.

MITCHAM BID FOR SCOTTISH TRUST Sensational Rise in Share Values

It was a minute or two before he reached for the whisky and water, needing it. His hand was trembling, so much so that he had to put the glass down again. He switched to the stocks column. There was a plus sign, and after it the figure of eight shillings and sevenpence.

Hamish pulled down the handkerchief tucked up his sleeve and patted his upper lip, where he could feel the sweat under his moustache. He began to do mental arithmetic for which he was ill-equipped

by his education, but even his approximate estimates gave him thousands on his capital. Thousands!

He was really in this, in on the ground floor, reaping his benefit along with the smart boys in Glasgow, along with Will Innis and probably Jock, too. And Hamilton the banker. Old Hamilton with his eyes like a setter with worms, the same appealing look of pain.

Well, those eyes ought to be brighter this morning. By gum! A lot brighter.

Sell? Ought he to take his profit and get out while the going was good? Would this be a sudden upsurge that would settle down again into one of those dismal dropping away of halfpennies? Lord, he hadn't a clue. Here he was with thousands now that might be gone or going tomorrow. Thousands! A wine boat to Portugal. Paint! Paint the hall, and the drawing-room.

He knew then that he mustn't be silly. It was the amateur who went in for these idiotic jubilations. The boys in the know lit cigars and made clicking noises through their teeth.

Sell? But supposing the shares went to twenty shillings? Or twenty-two? More than double his capital. If he sold and the rise went on it would be a kind of hell.

He needed advice, the calming voice of experience in this peculiar contemporary lunacy. He went to a phone booth, fumbling for the needed pennies.

'Give me Scotsroofs, Kilrudderie. No, I don't know the number. A call for Mr. Jock Innis.'

He waited, still sweating, wishing he had brought the last of his whisky with him.

'Hello? Jock, is that you?'

The fellow was his brother suddenly, in the world of speculation, one in the select band who could double their capital by a takeover bid.

'Hamish, here. Hamish Fairway-Campbell.'

'Oh, good morning, Colonel.' Jock's voice sounded light, amused. 'Pleased with the news today?'

'By Jove I am.'

'So you plunged, eh?'

'Well, yes, rather. I have a good deal. Look here, Jock, you've got to tell me what to do now. Do I hold on to these things?'

'Good heavens, yes.'

'But what about a set-back, eh? I'm no financier, you know. That's to say I really am in no position to take a very long view and all that sort of thing. My way has always been to take my profit and nip out.'

That was a damn' lie. His way had been to take his loss and go and feed the hens. Hamish's hand drummed against the little shelf provided for phone books. His throat was parched.

'I'd like your advice on this. I mean to say a tip when to sell and so on. New to this game, really, and all that sort of thing. What sort of figure would you set, you know a sort of safe maximum?'

'My father says they'll certainly go to twenty-three, Colonel. My own bet from what he tells me of the set-up there in Glasgow is a settling at about twenty-seven.'

'Twenty-seven!'

Again the frenzied arithmetic in the hot little booth where he sweated. Capital damn' nearly trebled. Trebled! It made one feel slightly hysterical.

'When?' Hamish gasped. 'I mean . . . how long are we going to have to wait?'

'I should think they'll climb for about a year. Of course one mustn't overlook a minor recession.'

'Eh? Good God! Is there going to be one?'

Jock laughed. The bloody little man sounded as though he was sitting at his desk enjoying himself.

'The minor recession is something that can blow up any time in our world, Colonel. Khrushchev might make another peace offer with something solid to back it up. That would mean steel and the heavies taking a plunge, of course.'

'You mean the threat of peace could more or less shake Blaehill? Is that what you're saying?'

'It could shake everything. Mind you, it doesn't look likely at the moment. It's my view that the Americans are going to scrap most of their present rocket programme in favour of this new utterly hush-hush rejector screen.'

'What in hell's name is a rejector screen?'

'No one knows really, Colonel. But if it comes off it's going to mean the most tremendous boom in electronics, and that'll balance out any shock to the heavies from the limitation of conventionalists.'

'Oh,' said Hamish, feeling suddenly a little sick.

'I'm buying electronics,' Jock said. 'Very modestly, of course.'

Father isn't. I don't blame him either, it's certainly a gamble, and might even be a long one.'

'What about . . . Blaehill? Have you any dates for this . . . minor recession?'

Jock laughed again.

'None at all, I'm afraid. I'd be a rich man damn' soon if I had second sight economically.'

'You advise me to hang on then?'

'Oh, absolutely. I wouldn't sell under twenty. I'm perfectly sure they'll reach eighteen or nineteen in three months. You'll double your money if you hang on that long.'

'Thank you,' Hamish said.

He would double his money and get out. That, after all, was a reasonable profit for a military type. It would be tempting his peculiar Fates to hang on any longer.

'Jock, you don't think that recession will hit us before three months?'

'Not a sign of it at the moment. The Russians are being frightfully rough and the Consumer Index is rising. Also, the hire purchase check isn't going on. I've had that straight from someone I trust on this. As soon as it's confirmed that we have no change here you'll see a real flicker on the markets. Another boost to Blaehill, naturally.'

'Yes, of course. Well, I'm most obliged to you.'

'Look here, Colonel, you wouldn't like me to put you on to my broker in Glasgow! I've found him a sound fellow.'

'Oh, no, no! Ah . . . no thank you. My affairs are really very simple. I use Hamilton the banker.'

'You what? That old fuddy-duddy?'

'Yes. I know he's a little absurd. But the fellow serves my purposes. They're . . . ah . . . small ones.'

'One should never have small purposes, Colonel! They automatically diminish one's chances. Oh, by the way, I don't think I've seen you to thank you properly for that little bit of business.'

'What? Oh. Look here . . . perhaps not over the phone, eh?'

'All right. I would like to say, though, that we're getting on swimmingly. Everything very smooth. Annexe going up and so on.'

'Good. Good.'

Hamish didn't like the reminder of the little job for which he had suddenly received his fee. It was something, once done, which he

had put out of mind, aided in this by the ease in which he had managed the matter. About twenty-five minutes' talk had done it. For that he was doubling his capital.

He went out of the booth, back to where he had left his whisky and found, to his surprise, the glass empty. He was certain he hadn't finished it. At the next table sat a party of commercial travellers, big loud men who, when one thought of it, probably wouldn't be beyond nipping off someone else's whisky. Not that they needed to, with the Consumer Index or whatever it was rising.

Hamish picked up his paper and walked into the cocktail bar, quite certain that the laughter which flared up behind him wasn't disconnected with that disappearance of whisky. They looked, the pack of them, the sort who had put in the Labour government in 1945 and never had a bad day since.

Why the hell shouldn't he work his little rackets in this time when it was the only way you got on? You'd get no thanks for not doing it.

The girl serving at the bar had left youth behind without apparently being aware of the fact. She was well-bosomed under the embroidery of a peasant blouse and coy, with her hair tinted and piled up as though she had just got off the train from Piccadilly. Only her voice, with its unique Scots refinement, labelled her a local.

'Good afternoon. How may ai serve you?'

'Double whisky,' Hamish said. 'Water.'

The barmaid clearly liked military types. She produced the drink and held the water jug with her little finger just slightly out. She was using a great deal of 'Night in Paris' and this reached Hamish as he was settling the whisky under his nose. He restrained a snort, turning away to one of the tables, leaving the woman to polish her counter, eyelids, loaded with mascara, drooping. But she didn't give up easily.

'Aren't you Colonel Fairway-Kemble?'

'I am.'

'You'll be going to the County Council meeting?'

'Yes.'

'Ai thought so. No doubt you'll know mai brother . . . Councillor Mackson.'

'Good God!' Hamish said.

He was really startled. This woman, with a coating of refinement

that would have served in South Edinburgh, seemed an improbable sister for Mackson, the rough stalwart of the Labour benches.

The barmaid gave a short, girlish laugh.

'Mai brother's bark,' she said, 'is worse than his bait.'

'His what? Oh. Bite. Yes, I see. No doubt, no doubt.'

Drat the woman. Why couldn't she leave him alone to think about doubling his capital? Perhaps trebling? No, there must be no folly this time, the opportunity seized without greed. Greed could be his downfall.

'Of course, ai'm a Tory maiseif.'

'Good. Glad to hear that. Hope you put your brother right?'

'Oh, ai try to. We hev the most awful rows. You wouldn't believe it, Colonel.'

'No, daresay not. Well, they say women always win in the end. You get your brother on our side. That'll be the day.'

'Quite a weg, aren't you, Colonel? As a matter of fact ai think mai brother has an cx to graind at this meeting.'

'He always does. Always trying to put something new on to the taxpayers. Swimming-pool for primary school toddlers or something. Or he wants to tear down a wall of the hospital and build it up in glass so the surgery cases can get the benefit of ultra violet rays in bed. Not ordinary glass, mind you, vita glass, a pound a square inch or something. You can tell him I said so.'

'Ai will.'

He wondered at his table in the dining-room whether it had perhaps been unwise to talk to Mackson's sister like that. Undoubtedly it had been the whisky in him. The trouble was not being used to the stuff these days. But perhaps that would change. Damn it, it would change. No more watered drinks at Rosemount. No young Tory councillors passing him on a hill in their tin boxes, either. He'd get a small Jag. Why the hell not? Take Hester on a beano to the south of France.

He smiled at the waitress.

'I don't think a great deal of your soup,' he said. 'You can tell the chef. I'm sending it back. I'll have the salmon. Oh . . . and a lager.'

The hall where the County Council had its general meeting was a Victorian relic, lofty, with a mock Gothic ceiling decked out in a fretwork of dusty brown wood. Mackson and his friends had not yet managed to re-house this public service in a new building of glass and chromium with foam rubber seating, all to the tune of a quarter

of a million from the taxpayer. And it had to be admitted that the old place had its disadvantages. The acoustics for one thing, were peculiar, in that most of the speeches went straight up into the roof to stay there, and Councillors of long standing developed a peculiar bellow to make themselves heard.

On this occasion the Chairman was Provost of one of the County's few industrial towns with a Labour majority, a man with the drooping jowls of a bloodhound and a voice that would have sent chills down an escaped prisoner's back. He was continually standing on his principles, hoisting himself heavily to his feet to do this, and was easily moved by the sad plight of the British masses. Hamish could well remember one occasion on which Provost Blackie had, with tears in his eyes, excelled himself. He was supporting a motion to turn a perfectly adequate rural part-time fire service into a full-time professional corps, a little move which was going to cost the County an additional seventeen thousand pounds a year, and the Provost had ended a twenty-minute peroration by raising his arms and standing with them outstretched as though inviting martyrdom.

'Fellow Councillors, you say that seventeen thousand pounds is a lot of money. I agree, it is a lot of money. But I say this to you, and I say it from my heart, that if seventeen thousand pounds saves the life of one citizen in this fair County of ours it will be money well spent.'

Blackie was a relic really, a hangover from days when his cause was a real one, long before a Conservative socialism was running the country mainly for the benefit of the class he represented. He enjoyed being Chairman, even though the dignity of the high carved-back chair at the head of the long table meant he was cut off physically from the rest of his party.

Seating was a matter of considerable manœuvre. Only the chairs about the table allowed their occupants to be audible, and these offered accommodation for about a third of the total present. The Labour group invariably arrived early enough to establish themselves in a compact unit down one side, closely followed by the Tories who mattered, who invariably had black briefcases to indicate this. Hamish had such a case himself and his favourite seat, which had only once or twice been challenged. This faced the Press table so there was little danger of anything he said being missed by the reporters from the local papers.

Ventilation was another problem in the hall. The windows held a

good deal of heraldic stained glass and could only be opened with difficulty and after about an hour of any session the cigarette and tobacco smoke, added to the static air, produced a kind of torpor in which it was easy to find yourself seconding an opposition motion.

Hamish, with whiskies and a lager behind him had brought a private heaviness to the meeting, a fact which didn't trouble him greatly, for in so far as he could see from the agenda there was really no item which need provoke his wrath at all. He sat down with a half-smile towards the Press table, four youths and a spotty girl, and proceeded to open his black dispatch case. It contained the minutes to be followed, a pad, two pencils, three pipe cleaners and a small phial of Veganin.

Blackie opened the meeting with an introductory rumble which didn't have to be heard and to which no one listened. Hamish began to fill his pipe, but it needed cleaning and he had a bit of a job getting it going, the acoustics playing one of their tricks and sending sucking noises all over the hall. Hamish went on with the business in hand, even though he was conscious of the Labour benches looking at him.

Mackson was there right in the centre. He looked rather like a rising young Trade Union official just before the move to a house in Surrey, with a two-car garage, a solid fellow with black hair, a face that was mostly jaw, and suitings that were no longer bought off the hook in the cheapest chain outfitter. In Fife he would already have stood for Parliament and probably have got in, and even in this County of rose gardens he was a force to be reckoned with.

Labour, of course, was in a minority, Blackie having the Chair as a kind of gracious privilege which was the reward of long service, but it was a compact minority, with a disciplined coherence. Hamish knew for a fact that they always met in the mornings before these meetings to decide on policy in the afternoon's fight against corruption of the established money dictatorship. And now, looking at them over the fumes from his pipe, it appeared they seemed slightly grimmer than usual, but this might well be an illusion which was a by-product of his luncheon.

Certainly the Education Estimates were dull enough, with the workers having little to complain about from the lavish hand which was doling out money on this front. Hamish had ideas about education which were not generally shared on his side and he had been requested to restrain them where possible. He found it possible today.

With the pipe going he thought about the Blaehill Trust, considerably puzzled by the whole thing. From the little he knew of his investment it seemed to be, on the surface at any rate, part of the nation-wide move towards change and the improvement of general living standards. It seemed a little odd that a scheme to rehouse ultimately several hundred thousand people should turn out so profitably to the private speculator. There was, he had no doubt, a perfectly acceptable explanation somewhere and he now reminded himself to look into it, as something to have on tap to confound his opponents should the need arise. At the moment, however, he was content to slump into a dream.

It was simple enough, just a matter of opening the morning papers in the days ahead, sipping coffee with the peculiar satisfaction brought by the knowledge that your holdings had put on another shilling while you slept. He also thought about Jaguars. They were perhaps not quite the investment of a Rover, but probably the sixties offered a man his last chance to be dashing and he ought to take it. He remembered then with considerable pleasure that he had sent back his tinned tomato soup. It was the kind of gesture towards the world that he meant now to indulge from time to time.

He moved from the dream to sums. His pension, a seeming pittance, would be merely the core of his personal finances on which he could soon tack the additions planned more than a decade ago. His hens were still showing a slight profit, largely as a result of a move towards young broilers made recently, and he could count on two hundred a year from that. If he kept two thousand of his profits for play and the new Jag. that ought to leave him about ten thousand to re-invest in shares with a high return. He could count on perhaps five hundred and fifty a year income from this. In all just a bit over two thousand. A man could live passably on that, even in Rosemount, particularly if he was alert for a few effective tax dodges. It would at least mean they weren't wheezing from week to week and month to month. And this in itself would be a kind of heaven. Not opulence, just a quiet heaven, with decent whisky in the cupboard and the feeling you could go to the Perth races twice a year and maybe lose a fiver. With Hester in a new hat.

There would also be enough for Hester to live on if he went first, which he intended to do.

'If that's the end of discussion,' Blackie bellowed suddenly, 'we'll

put the estimates to a motion. I may say, speaking for myself, and for my party, that, whereas the estimates do not include provision for items I would have liked to see included, that I can at least vote for them with a sense of something achieved, and that we, in this County, are not letting the side down in terms of the general advance on this front.'

The Provost had scant respect for the notion of the neutrality of the chair. He used it as a pulpit, and with his sermons prolonged most sessions by at least an hour.

The next item was the disposal of sewage in coastal areas by direct drainage into the sea, and though the County had no coastline at all this was duly read and Mackson rose to his feet to have it recorded in the minutes that the pollution of our coastline by faeces was a damn' national disgrace.

Hamish found his pipe had gone out. He also noticed that Lord Benton of Benwerrie was asleep. His Lordship was rarely an active participant in debates, but he was a venerable figure who had taken, since his feet had swollen, to coming to County Council meetings in rubber sandshoes. On occasion, after these sessions, Hamish and Lord Benton adjourned to a local for a drink, for which Hamish invariably paid, his Lordship being rich but careful.

Hamish didn't sleep himself, but was near it, his body taken by a sense of well-being, as though all the strains of years had suddenly been rolled away, and he saw at last on the horizon the life he had planned for his last days. It was a feeling of comfort mainly, of warm security, which produced in him a novel and almost benign tolerance. He could even look across at the scowling Mackson and think that he was probably rather a decent chap under the political front. Perhaps he might even bestir himself a little to be more amiable towards the opposition. They were, thank God, in no way a threat, and as a Scot one accepted Burns up to a point, a man's a man and all that. Might stand the fellow a beer one day. Why not?

He considered from a position of detached remoteness, each of the items brought up, but kept out of all discussion himself, sunk into the neutrality of his new state. Even Blackie's speeches seemed to take on a certain mellifluous tone in his ear, a phrase turned with a ponderous ingenuity that was in its way an achievement. The Provost's verbosity was, after all, clearly the product of painstaking effort over the years and as such deserved a charitable recognition.

'This brings us to private members' items,' Blackie announced.

This was where the fireworks sometimes started, but today proceedings seemed greased by an almost unnatural willingness on the part of all to get the meeting over. Hamish doodled on his pad, at a little design based on the figure of the pound sterling.

'I have a matter I wish to raise,' Mackson said, on his feet.

Hamish glanced at him. The man was possibly dyspeptic. It might even be an ulcer, distressing in one relatively so young. He glowered now, as though from internal pain.

'It has been brought to my attention, Mr. Chairman, that there has been a bit of high-handed carry-on at Committee level. I might say more than that. A bit of jiggery-pokery!'

'You have the floor, Mr. Mackson,' Blackie said, like a teacher to his star pupil.

Hamish sat up then, the torpor lifting. He was aware of that sudden tension in the room which was often a preface to trouble. The reporters were on the alert, the spotty girl already with her pencil going, almost as though this was the item for which she had been waiting, perhaps tipped off that it was coming. Mackson's sister, too, had certainly talked about the man having an axe to grind. What the devil? The fellow was staring across the table, not addressing the Chair at all. Hamish felt reluctant to admit to himself that he was the object of that stare.

'I repeat, Mr. Chairman, jiggery-pokery. I am a plain man and I use plain words. It seems to me that this is the time for them. I am referring to the matter of the Kilrudderie school playing-field, now appropriated by private enterprise.'

Hamish felt that in his body, the physical jolt of it, and he was mentally winded, caught completely unready.

'Fellow Councillors, I raise this matter because I am convinced that it is my duty to do so. As you all know I am a member of the County Planning Committee. I endeavour to look into what lies behind the decisions we take on that Committee. This means a lot of work and a lot of my time. I'm not saying that others on the Committee aren't as careful as I am, but I will say this, I know a good deal about that field at Kilrudderie. I know, too, the feeling in the town about our decision to let them have it for a playing-field. That, Mr. Chairman, was the right decision. But it has been reversed in Committee, behind our backs as you might say.'

Hamish forced himself up, he had to.

'Mr. Chairman, I protest. There was no question of this action being taken behind anyone's back.'

'Was there no?' Mackson shouted. 'Did you not, Colonel Fairway-Campbell take damn' good care to convene a meeting of that Committee on a day when you knew I couldn't be present?'

They were both still standing, the table between them.

'I did not! I phoned your wife to request your attendance.'

'Aye. So you did. And when you found I couldn't be there you rushed the meeting through on that day. If you'd waited till the next I might have been back from Glasgow. And cooked your bacon for you.'

'Mr. Chairman, I must protest again against this language. Do I or do I not have the floor?'

Blackie was flushed.

'You made your protest, Colonel. I would say that Councillor Mackson still has the floor. He has the right to state his case.'

Mackson smiled. He continued to look at Hamish, who had sat down, suddenly glad to.

'Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I for one would be the last to complain about the amount of work got through by committees and decisions taken in them. That's got to be. But it doesn't have to be rushed through, Mr. Chairman. I submit to you all that the rest of the Committee were unaware of the true situation in Kilmallock. I submit also that they are unaware of the feeling in the town at this moment about the appropriation . . . and I use that word deliberately . . . of a piece of ground scheduled as a playing-field. This ground has been snatched from under the noses of the people of Kilmallock to swell the holdings of a local industrial magnate.'

Hamish rose again.

'Mr. Chairman, I protest at this distortion of the facts!'

Blackie was uneasy now.

'It is my ruling that we hear what Councillor Mackson has to say.'

'Even if it is indirectly libellous of me?'

'I'm stating facts, Colonel,' Mackson shouted.

'Order! Order!'

Hamish sat down again. He could feel himself sweating. Mackson had put both his hands on the table, leaning forward on them.

'I doubt very much, Colonel, whether you could deny what the

real feeling in Kilmuirie is right at this moment. You're the Councillor from that town, but if you went down into it, into the shops and houses and asked what the people thought . . . they'd tell you all right. They're angry enough not to be polite about it. They think their school playing-field has been taken from them, and handed over to Mr. Will Innis of Scotsroofs Ltd. The kiddies are now going to have to walk through the busy traffic of the town to get to any possible new playing-ground. Where they might have played in safety a factory is already going up.'

Hamish jumped up again. He didn't look at the Chair.

'Yes a factory is going up. A factory that will bring more work and more prosperity to the town. Something good for all of us. Since you're telling the people here about Kilmuirie, why don't you tell them that Scotsroofs is the commercial life of our town? What's good for Scotsroofs is good for everyone in the place. If that business flourishes it means more work for the boys and girls coming out of our school.'

'The business could have damn' well flourished on another site!'

'Order, order!' Blackie heaved himself up. 'Language there, Councillor. Language!'

Mackson apologized. He was a rough man, he said, angered by injustice. A man in his station couldn't always control his tongue at times like this.

Hamish sat fuming, holding his pipe in both hands, pressing on the stem as though he wanted to break it. Mackson, still standing, assumed that the floor was his.

'I have nothing personal against Colonel Fairway-Campbell,' he said deliberately, in a controlled tone. 'There have been many matters on which we have collaborated in the past. But I will not serve on this Council and keep quiet when I see what I believe to be a gross misuse of power by members of this body.'

Hamish didn't move this time. He knew he hadn't helped himself by shouting back at this demagogue. He was conscious now of the reporters at their table, five heads bent, five pencils going like mad. This was certainly going to look pretty in the papers, very pretty indeed. The thing to do was not to let it get worse. It was the kind of caution Hester put on him when he was in one of his angers. He could almost hear her voice admonishing. There would be time later for a dignified rebuttal of any points Mackson trotted out. He must

sit here and make a note of those points, one by one. He wished he wasn't sweating so much.

Lord Benton had woken up. He was staring at Hamish with his oddly pastel blue eyes, which looked out at the world from above brownish patches of sagging skin. His Lordship's mouth was turned down, as though in distaste, perhaps something stronger than that. The man looked as though he had suddenly been affronted by a particularly bad smell.

All right for him, Hamish thought wildly, and his Glasgow engineering millions.

'The Colonel has accused me of getting personal,' Mackson said. 'I don't want to do that. But there are times when it's not easy to by-pass. This is one of them. I submit to you all that it is not without significance in this matter that the Colonel's family will soon be united in marriage with the Innis family.'

Hamish scraped back his chair.

'This is outrageous!'

'Aye, that's my view, too,' Mackson agreed. 'I think it's outrageous that matters of public policy should be affected by considerations of family. And because of this I call on Councillor Fairway-Campbell to resign his seat!'

'Why the hell should I? On a lot of trumped up, malicious charges!'

'Order, order!'

'They are not malicious, Colonel. They're facts. I accuse you of hurrying through a meeting with the deliberate intention of not having me at it, because I was acquainted with the facts and you knew perfectly well that none of the other members were. I accuse you of playing along with the schemes of a local business magnate with whom you are shortly to be connected by a marriage. I'm not suggesting you got any direct benefit from so doing. . . .'

'Mr. Chairman, do I have to submit to this kind of insult?'

'You're out of order, Councillor Mackson!'

Mackson sat down and so did Hamish. There was a silence. In it Hamish became aware, suddenly and slowly, of hostility, and not only from the faces directly opposite to him. There were other stares besides that of the engineering blue blood. He was isolated, in a kind of wilderness, and he knew then that he couldn't expect anyone to rise on his behalf. He was alone in this, completely, and it gave him a desolate, lost feeling. He was afraid in that moment to look around at

the friends he had here, people he had worked with for fourteen years. He knew, too, what an utter fool he had been, thinking he could get away with this.

'Councillor Fairway-Campbell,' Blackie's voice was intoned. 'Have you anything you wish to say at this point?'

Hamish didn't get up this time.

'I am not going to try and answer charges which I know are unfounded. I've served here for fourteen years and tried to make a job of it. I think that after today my usefulness in this service is probably over. So I resign. I'll submit that in writing.'

He pushed the minutes into his black portfolio, along with his pipe and matches. Then he got up and walked out of the hall, not looking at anyone.

Hester sat in a chair in the study made gloomy by the grey light of evening. Her hands were clasped in front of her.

'Oh, Hamish! You can say what you like about the County Council. You cared about it. It was part of your life. I've got the feeling that . . . that I drove you to this in some way. Was it my whining about money?'

'You haven't whined about it. Don't try to take the blame on yourself, Hester. I was a damn' fool. It's not for the first time in my life. But I've never made such a public job of it before. I'll take bloody good care not to expose myself like that again.'

'You mean . . . you won't take any active part in things again?'

'Why the hell should I? It's not my world.'

She came over to him, sitting on the arm of his chair, her hand on his shoulder.

'Hamish. You're not to blame yourself. It wasn't you. It was that little man up at Scotsroofs.'

'Don't try to shove things on to Jock. I wanted the money!'

'He put it there,' Hester said bitterly.

MISS BEALE sat in her chair by the fire, staring out at the limes still touched by the sunlight of the long summer evening. Occasionally visitors went by, quite close to her window, some of them looking in. It made her stir in her chair with irritation. The summer was alien to the old woman, bringing each year an increasing horde of strangers. She liked to look out and see known faces, to speculate on the missions about the town of people she had watched all of their lives. These were just city trash, airing their young and themselves after boarding-house high teas of stale fried fish.

Jessie came in to clear away the tray by the side of the old woman's chair.

'When did you last do the windows?' Miss Beale asked.

'I'm no able for them.'

'So we leave it to the rain, is that it?'

'Aye, we leave it, like a lot of things.'

'It's a new thing for me, Jessie. That rubbish from Glasgow sceing my windows dirty.'

'They're no rubbish at all. A good class of folk we get here.'

Miss Beale snorted.

'There's no peace in the town with them. The only place you can get peace is the churchyard. They don't go in there.'

Jessie straightened her back.

'Aye. You're no thinkin' about churchyards on your holiday.'

'I think about them. They haven't cut the grass in there yet. It's a disgrace. It's the Town Council. There's not an educated man on it these days. Just a pack of shopkeepers. Bailie Manderson's tomb is half hidden by nettles and docken.'

'Och, well,' Jessie said.

'When I'm gone I want you to see that they cut the grass about the Beales. And the Mandersons, too. We're connected with the Mandersons. They were a decent family in this burgh. My mother's cousin married a Manderson.'

'I ken, I ken,' Jessie said wearily, picking up the tray. 'Is there anything you're wantin', then?'

'I wish you'd mind me! I said you're to see that they cut the grass.'
'I'll no be here.'

The door shut. A coal spat out a piece of slate suddenly, and it lay glowing on the tiles of the hearth. Miss Beale bent over painfully for the fireside set, her fingers fumbling to detach the brush and shovel. When she was settled back in the chair again she had forgotten what she had been saying to Jessie.

This irritated her, for it had somehow been important. There were a lot of important things these days that came to her and then went again. She felt the summer mocking her, filling the air with the voices of the young, and silly laughter. No one cared any more about the things that mattered; they walked out in the streets for pleasure, the women in trousers, the men in shirts with their sleeves rolled up showing pale, hairy arms. Miss Beale plucked at the upholstery of her chair with old fingers only slightly knotted, though the veins seemed to have pushed themselves free of flesh, swollen, only held in by thin, brown-flecked skin.

The churchyard, that was it. If she stabbed at her mind it still worked. It was lazy, that was all, lazy like her body from too much sitting. The grass in there. They ought to cut it. It was nearly July. In the old days Eckie Bain had the seeing to the churchyard, his whole job and his life, too. In the summer he cut the grass with a sickle, most of the time down on his hands and knees, you always saw him about somewhere. In the winter he propped up the stones and monuments that were sagging, being a bit of a mason on the side as well. Long gone, Eckie, and no one to follow him.

Miss Beale tried to think where they had put him, but couldn't remember. It would be over on the new ground probably. There were a lot over there now, people who didn't have family places, all the newcomers. You had to walk past the tombs that mattered and around the back of the church to get to them.

Well, they wouldn't go round the back of the church for her, that was something. She'd left the money to have the family stone cleaned, too, at the same time as they put her name on it. It was a funny thing that the lair just had room for one more, as though someone had planned it that way long ago when putting up the monument, her great-grandfather maybe.

Great men in the town in their day and the County, too, the Beales, but now no one asked about them. She had their letters, all done up

in ribbon. She was leaving them to the Kirk Session, not that this would do any good. You wouldn't see a man like John McCall interested in the great men of the parish in another day. It might do him a power of good if he took a bit of interest and an example from his betters gone before.

The last of the Beales, except for grand-nephew Harold Beale out in Michigan who came back ten years ago to sniff out any family money. Not like a Beale at all with his podgy face, not half the man his father was before him. And as for the money . . . he'd got a shock. Not a penny of Beale money was going to America.

'Jessie? Jessie!'

The door opened.

'What is it, then?'

'Is Harold Beale dead?'

'Not that I ken.'

'I thought it might be something I'd forgotten. He's not to get a thing out of this house, do you hear? You're not to give him so much as a pot. I'm not having Beale things taken to America.'

'I'll no be here,' Jessie said.

Alone again the old woman stared at the door, then her eyes moved on to a large darkened seascape in oils, in a chipped gilt frame.

Valuable, that's what it was. The man who had painted that was an R.S.A. He'd spent a summer in Kilmallock once and her father had got it cheap. Ark—— something, was his name. Famous. The name was on the picture somewhere, only it wasn't worth getting up for that.

When you got old you didn't have enough blood, that was what the old doctor used to say, the one before this jack-in-the-box. The old doctor had time for you, and a cup of tea and a biscuit and a chat. He wasn't a man for injections, either, not like they were these days. Out with your arm and shove in a needle. Was that to make the blood go to your brain, the blood you didn't have enough of? Pack of fools. Not really educated at all, just jumped up boys.

Grass? What had she been thinking about grass for? Yes, the cemetery.

Miss Beale pushed herself up. Sometimes when she did that she had a moment's dizziness and her legs just gave at the knees. But she was all right this time. It might be the sherry egg-nog giving her a bit of strength.

In the hall she stood by a tall white porcelain Chinese jar with blue bamboo on it, fumbling amongst the sticks and umbrellas it held, finding the silver handle mounted on ebony. She pulled it out with a rattling.

Jessie stood in the kitchen doorway.

'Whatever are you up to?'

'I'm going out.'

'Maircy! It's goin' on for eight at night.'

'There's still plenty of light. I'm going to the cemetery.'

Odd how your strength came back sometimes, even into your voice. She could hear her voice louder.

'You'll do no such thing, Miss Beale. You ken fine you ought to be in your bed.'

'Out of the way, woman! You can open the door.'

It was still warm outside, the sun sunk now behind the houses of the old town but a glow bringing out colour from the leaves on the limes. Miss Beale's umbrella prodded at the smooth asphalt laid where she remembered cobbles. There were trippers approaching, a man and a woman pushing a pram, with two children running free. The woman was wearing bright red trousers and a white blouse that seemed to have all it could do to keep her breasts from the cleavage of a V-front. Her lips matched her trousers.

'Fine night,' the man said.

Miss Beale looked past him, up the road towards the church gates. Her feet made a sharp clicking as she went and the young wife laughed suddenly, the wind hustling that sound after the old woman.

It was with relief that she saw the first tomb, the Wilsons', handsome and massive, with a little pedimented roof over the memorial plaque, solid-looking, though they had been a feeble family on both sides, with bad chests. Effie and John had gone in the same year, just when he was expecting to be made Bailie. She could have told him he would never reach that honour, not with the kind of Council they had in those days, serious men. It had been nineteen-eleven when those two went, and none of the other names carved into stone above them had much of a record of years.

Miss Beale stared at the memorial in a kind of triumph, from a long-lived stock, pitying weakness. It was the way the Lord served some and probably they deserved it. Effie had been a gormless creature at best.

The next tomb was the Hunts', a county family, with a house two miles out of town, now without a roof and recently sold for demolition. There were some Hunts left in the West Indies but they didn't care for the family name apparently; the stone was cracked, with ivy widening the split each year. You'd think they could pull out the ivy, at least, while they were cutting the grass. There was still a pew in the church with the Hunts' name on it, though there hadn't been one of them in it for twenty-five years.

She went on to the Beales', staring at the names which dug into her own history, reading them with her far-sighted eyes . . . and the dates . . . while her mouth went slack and her chin quivered a little. She had the feeling of them waiting for her, a communion of Beales, assembled in a big drawing-room sipping the best China tea. It was her idea of Heaven, tidy and firm-edged, nothing hazy about it at all, and no sound of music. She could even supply the celestial conversation, being Beales they would talk about themselves.

The Mandersons had separate graves and the Bailie, who died rich, left instructions for a table top. This had been duly placed over him after two years for subsidence, a solid stone base, then Corinthian columns cunningly worked supporting a great slab of polished granite with gilt letters inset. There had once been a little iron railing all about but this had been taken to help defeat the Germans and, with defences down, the docken and nettles swept in from untended ground sending roots deep to survive all cuttings.

Miss Beale remembered the inscription all right, it said, after the dates, 'Justice of the Peace and Bailie of this Town'. Then: 'He walked with the Lord, and the Lord was with him always'. And it was true enough, the old Minister had made them put that on for his Elder of thirty years' standing.

She wanted to see the inscription again, to take comfort from its gilded comment on a life. The scandalous obstacle of weeds affronted her and she whacked at them with a sudden flurry of energy, using the ebony handled umbrella and advancing with a kind of panting anger. And then she stopped.

The Bailie's tomb was in use behind its screen of weeds. The shock of that kept back understanding for a moment, holding her staring into the half-shadow made by the granite top. Eyes were watching, two bodies still, frozen, but the eyes moved with a kind of fear. And

there was something else, a kilt fanned out, reversed, its bright pleats like the bent petals of a flower about the shining white buttocks of a man.

Miss Beale's umbrella came up in a slow arc. The sound she made was half screamed, half strangled in her throat.

'Mary Wood! Ye bitch! Ye whore! Ye Jezebel! The Bailie's tomb!'

Down came the umbrella on to polished granite, shattering, the stem snapped, only the silver handle still between her fingers. She dropped it and blundered away, gasping, almost falling, then safely on to gravel, whimpering towards the gates.

Jessie found Miss Beale in the hall, the old woman sitting there on a chair, but her back straight, her head held high, her eyes fixed on a wall she didn't see.

'The Bailie's tomb . . .' she said.

'Maircy! You've taken a turn! Oh, my goodness! I told ye! The churchyard's no place for you at this hour. Oh, Maircy! I'll get the Doctor.'

Jessie began to weep. Miss Beale didn't rebuke her, not hearing.

Dr. Thomas Hill was brisk, almost philosophic. He stood with his legs slightly apart by the late Miss Beale's shiny tile fireplace.

'Extraordinary thing life with the old, it goes on in a sort of suspended state after a certain age. The body seems to have developed a kind of brittle immunity to most ailments. Medically speaking there really isn't anything to keep the very old from getting very much older. And then something snaps, for no obvious reason that we can see.'

'Did she say anything?' John McCall asked quietly.

'Nothing sensible, really. She wasn't ever conscious enough to recognize me. That's why I told Jessie not to send for you sooner. No point in it.'

'I'd like to have been here.'

'My dear man, she wasn't a person any more. She had just stopped. It isn't as if you went in for last rites.'

'We do in our way, you know.'

Hill laughed.

'Really? Well, we must establish a better liaison then. I have no wish to be an obstacle to your duties, McCall. But I assure you there

wasn't anything you could do for the old girl. She went her last walk and that was that.'

'What was it she said?'

'Oh, something about the cemetery. She seemed to have it a lot on her mind recently. Natural enough, I suppose. She knew it would be her next move. She did mention a Bailie's tomb.'

'I see.'

'That means something to you, McCall?'

'Well, the weeds haven't been cut about it. I noticed that yesterday. I must get the town men on to it. She probably wanted to protest.'

'Quite likely. Amazing old thing, really. I shall quite miss her, you know, if a doctor ever really misses his patients. I always came here knowing she'd be hopping mad about something. I used to say, well, what's it today, Miss Beale? The last of her kind in a way.'

'Yes.'

'Well, I must get on. It's been quite a day for me. You know I haven't had my supper yet? And my wife had a scampi dish waiting three hours ago. I'd like a few words with these boys who say we have a cushy time on National Health.'

When the Doctor's car had driven off John went into the kitchen. Jessie was sitting with her hands in her lap, not yet accepting an ending. She looked as though she was waiting for time to put a little space between her and death before she started cautiously to breathe again.

'Well, Jessie, have you anywhere you can go tonight?'

'I'll stay here,' Jessie said, her hands moving, pushing tighter into each other.

'I don't think you should, you know. What about your niece?'

'I'm no wantin' her. I'll jest stay wi' Miss Beale. I couldnac be feart o' her after all these years.'

'Would you like me to say a prayer, Jessie?'

'Aye, I could dae wi' that.'

20

THE headline in the paper had been with Jock all day, never quite dismissed. He watched his father drive off from the Scotsroofs offices in the Bentley and then went back to his desk, opening a drawer and pulling the paper out again. It was a national daily which had got on to the item in a dull summer week when Khrushchev was in the Crimea and there was no strike imminent. The headlines were centred and you couldn't miss them.

COUNCILLOR RESIGNS AFTER NEPOTISM CHARGE

The paper explained very soon what nepotism meant to keep the reader with it. There must have been considerable debate at the news desk over the use of the word, but it had a faintly sinister ring which gave it an attraction.

'No defence, really,' Jock thought, reading again what Hamish had said. 'He took it lying down.'

Will Innis had bellowed.

'Damn it, Jock, you've landed us in this. I'd never have allowed it. Supposing those newspaper fellows get hold of this business of the Colonel buying Blae Hill? They'll make it seem a direct bribe!'

Jock had only felt impatient with the bluff honesty his father wore like an Inverness cape about his business life, the rough homespun of straight dealing a kind of trade mark. It had an antique attraction, but was none the less tiresome, an obstacle to complete understanding between them at this time of new expansion.

The old man's storm had been easy to deal with in a way, best treated with a half-pitying detachment that wasn't allowed to show. And Will Innis was off to London for ten days on the night sleeper, which was highly convenient. It was unlikely that he would be disturbed down there by any English covering of a minor Scottish scandal. The thing was not to go home to dinner and not see his father again before he had to leave.

Jock sat down and stared at the paper. It was half past five and the offices had gone quiet. He was conscious of a tension on his nerves, an uneasiness that was a warning. There were things happening

beyond his plans which could affect them, even be damaging. These must be assessed.

Why the hell had the Colonel just folded? He had a perfect case, he only needed to stand up with some spiel about doing his duty as he saw fit, the good of the community and what not. And the thing was he had started on this and then somehow packed up, walking out in a damning silence which he had allowed to happen. Surely it was elementary that in politics, even local politics, if you were shouted at you shouted back? A council chamber wasn't any tea party and no setting for a dignified reserve. The Colonel's walking out had looked like an admission of guilt. It read like that in this bloody paper.

Jock stared at the phone. Kilrudderie was on an automatic system now, safe enough. He pulled the instrument towards him and dialled.

'Hello?' It was Hester's voice, cold, as though expecting reporters. 'Rosemount.'

'Jock Innis here.'

'Oh.' The coldness deepened. He could see her face, so British in an outmoded tradition, her eyes fitted with blinds that could be snapped down to keep out intruders. 'Yes?'

'I'd like to speak to the Colonel.'

'He's with his hens.'

'Well . . . could you ask him to ring me? I'll be in my office for about an hour or so. Three eight four.'

'Very well.'

There was a click. No little courtesies offered and none expected. She would be figuratively holding her nose whenever his name was mentioned, lazy enough to immediately line up an object of blame in trouble. He was the obvious and handy object.

He wondered what she was thinking about Blaehill and whether an increase in fortune even by this road had brought its secret pleasure to the nest-guarding instincts of the female. Blaehill would have made that mouldering house safe enough for her time, and money meant that one could indulge the luxury of righteous indignation.

Jock's office, like his father's beneath, was fitted with its own little bar, and he got up and poured himself a stout whisky. The taste of it on his palate suggested that this might be sound policy for the evening, a good deal to drink. And in Kilrudderie's pubs.

There was no place like a pub about an hour before closing for

taking the local temperature. He could find out, obliquely, what they were thinking about the Colonel and the field and also whether or not as yet anyone had hitched his late cigarette-buying up with Elsie.

This was an unfortunate complication, very, adding to the feeling of a situation out of hand, though probably it was silly to be troubled at all.

Elsie, of course, would be troubled, in her isolation putting an emphasis on things which would be out of all proportion. He ought to try and get to her tonight, really, to deal with any signs of panic. Perhaps when the pubs were shut, when the worthy burghers wouldn't be expecting him to be bold about going to her. If they were suspicious it would give them insomnia in the small hours.

The phone went sooner than Jock had expected.

'Fairway-Campbell here. What did you want me for?'

'Sorry to bother you, Colonel. I'm afraid you have been a good deal recently. I wondered if we could help?'

'I think not.'

'I was considering a statement . . . from us. Quite a flat one, that we had never approached you for any help in the matter of the field.'

'I don't see what good lies would do at this stage.'

'But won't it be rather odd if we keep silent, Colonel?'

'Has your father put you up to this?'

'No, certainly not. He's very upset. But he has to go to London for a time. Tonight.'

'I see. I wish to hell I could.'

'Why don't you?'

'I have no intention of running away.'

Jock took a slow breath.

'I rather thought you had . . . at the meeting.'

'Indeed? And what would you have had me do? Defend my honour? I've had no training in doing that when I've lost it. It might be a good idea if you left us alone.'

'Very well,' Jock said.

Oddly he was trembling when he put down the receiver. He looked at his hands, surprised.

So that was the pose, all honour lost! The silly clot! As if he hadn't gone into things with his eyes open, with all the time in the world for his choice. Having made his decision he should have been

prepared to defend himself against trouble-makers like Mackson. Instead he had run away and was now behaving like a Boy Scout stripped of his pretty badges.

The wall of glass drew Jock then, the thing he had designed himself. He went and stood behind it, in a stillness, while outside was a turbulence of wind, the trees bending and the neatly planted floral beds taking a battering. It was a day of sun and high cloud and tremendous long vistas holding their sharp detail with a clarity that challenged the eye's range. To the distant edges of the valley you could see the stone farmhouses, the fields about them, undulations of green toned to the new crops coming. The hills were an edging enclosing a world and to Jock suddenly it was a little kingdom he had rejected, the real power in this stretched to the limit of a man's sight, his for the holding. It had never occurred to him that it might be enough, and it didn't now, but the sense of rejection was there, of turning from the humanly comprehensible to a pattern in which no one was set and there was no security. This was what his father had made, a security with margins, and the son was pushing the margins back.

For a moment he could almost sympathize with the old man's uneasiness at the process going on around him, the symbol of it those new buildings almost ready for roofing. There was a temptation in the idea of just hanging on, of fortifying a limited area and not venturing beyond it. A thousand barons in their day had seen the edges of their world from high windows and been content with no more than defence.

Jock smiled to himself. It was odd how you came back to this world bringing no more than a faint nostalgia for the physical sense of it about you and then in it you were caught up by the living importance of what went on, an old role thrust on you again in which a lot of the lines seemed already written and waiting. In reality he was only troubled in one small corner of his mind by the possibility of things going wrong in this little place, even going very wrong for him. If he was in a plane tomorrow perspective would push Kilrudderie into a comic insignificance, his angry family, an impoverished laird scrabbling for money and his honour, even a girl he had slept with.

What would it matter in Michigan? He squared his shoulders and went back to the drinks cupboard.

The public bar of the Farmer's Rest hadn't been modernized, still with its embroidered mahogany fittings and the faint suggestion hanging on, as in other old Scots houses, of drinking as a male business to be got through without trimmings. The room retained its slightly gaunt look, as though designed for use by sinners. No women ever came in here, even on market days; the American cocktail bar was for them, with olives and little onions and a pink light.

By nine o'clock the public bar was roaring. Outside the big cars waited ready to take home the farmers who prided themselves, almost as much as Aberdonians, on being able to hold their liquor. The town was represented by a few tradesmen and a goodly number of Scotsroofs workers, the rest a collection of Glasgow holidaymakers who were very near to bursting into song.

Jock had been standing beers to his constructional foreman and one or two others, part of a huddle pushed down to one end near a huge Victorian window fitted with what looked like lavatory glass to screen out the world. The beer was good and Jock had a thirst from earlier whiskies. He was talking loudly about America still the land of opportunity, throwing out expansive hints about bringing over selected Scots craftsmen to Michigan when the new scheme was rolling. He was one of the boys tonight, in the way that a director is one of the boys at the annual staff party, even ready with a story about a showgirl at the Labour Party Convention in Blackpool.

They laughed at his story, the laughter travelling beyond the group drinking his beer. One of the Glaswegians began hiccuping in his mirth and had to be slapped on the back.

Jock was the young lord amongst his people. He began to feel that there wasn't a horny hand here he hadn't shaken at one time or another, and he was attacked by a sudden and almost uncontrollable upsurge of sentiment about the Scottish working classes, their solid worth, and their basically reliable sense of their place in the economic scheme. With the honest brown eyes of MacArthur, the foreman, on him he ordered another round of drinks.

This was what he would miss in America, where every man was as good as you were, or planned to be. There was a lack of social stability over there and continuing traditions, with this settled feel of the big houses and the little houses and not a lot of movement from one to the other. Even in England the feeling was lost, new patterns eclipsing the old, but up here a man knew where he stood,

he looked you in the eye and drank your beer and when it was all over said, 'Good night, sir.' To hell with democracy, it was mostly an encumbrance. Every bit of work resulting from the new expansion that could possibly be kept in Scotland would be kept here. He almost said this to MacArthur and then realized that it might lead to some query about American wage levels which would disturb the tone of the evening's communion. Instead, on safe ground, he turned to Rangers chances with the Cup.

Inevitably it started, a thin wailing unsuccessfully clutching at a tune.

'I belong tae Glesca', dear old Glesca' toon. . . .'

'The silly buggers should stay there,' Jock said, under his breath, but not enough under.

There was a sudden lurching in the throng, a figure emerging from it, a man about Jock's height, but solid and square, muscle packed under a holiday blue suit. His shirt was open, with brown hair sprouting out at the neck and he had a face that was mostly jaw. He looked at Jock.

'Who the hell are yew ?'

MacArthur intervened, a man sober with years and responsibility, going into a whispering. Glasgow remained unimpressed.

'So that's it, eh ? The boss's nicht oot wi' the boys ? Well, well. Mixin' wi' the proleys, is yew ?'

'That's enough of that,' MacArthur said.

'Is it ? Let me tell yew it's not often I get near yin o' these. They's mostly nippin' in and oot their Rolls Royces.' The man patted his chest. 'Ah'm a riveter, see ? Ah build ships. An' to hell wi' yew. Yer no ma boss an' if yew try to get me the sack I'll bring oot ma bloody Union.'

'That'll do, that'll do,' MacArthur said.

Jock was standing smiling. The drink was working in him and he only clutched at sobriety fleetingly, the cold calm he wanted slippery.

'What's his name ?' the riveter asked MacArthur. 'Eh, what's his name ?'

'My name is Innis,' Jock said.

The riveter stared, his breathing heavy. The roaring in the bar was damping down, heads turning. Nearly everyone heard the next, bellowed words.

'Ma Gawd ! Ma lan'lady's been on aboot yew. The wee laddie o'

the old man. Brought yer fancy bint up frae London and set her up here under their noses, did yew ?'

The silence then was tight, packed into seconds. Jock had a flash consciousness of hostility in the pub, everyone beyond him, no one for him at all. He felt that before his right arm came back and his fist smashed against the riveter's jaw.

The riveter rocked on his feet, but that was all. Then he growled. He wasn't a trained fighter, but he moved in on Jock with a kind of venom behind sudden rage. Flaying arms caught Jock in the stomach, then square on the nose. Jock went down, his head hitting a chair leg. The barman shouted. Through a sudden, sick, clouded daze Jock saw Glasgow held by its own, dragged back. People were running into the street yelling.

Before Jock was hauled to his feet again by MacArthur, a policeman came through the door and it was Harris.

'What's this now, what's this ?'

'Time gentlemen, please,' the barman called in a kind of high thin panic.

He had never emptied the public so quickly, leaving only Jock and the foreman and the riveter with two supporters, a floor strewn with cigarette butts between them. Harris pulled out his notebook while Jock's nose bled into a handkerchief. He felt a swelling abrasion at one side of his left eye.

Harris was flustered under the dignity of the uniform.

'I don't think I understand this, Mr. Innis. Assault was it ?'

'Aye,' MacArthur snatching at a kind of belated loyalty. 'Yon asked for it, mind you.'

'Provocation ?' Harris said. 'Who . . . ah . . . started things ?'

'Him !' yelled the riveter.

'I hit him, yes,' Jock said, looking up into Harris's embarrassed face.

The policeman licked the end of his pencil. Then he wrote as he spoke the words.

'Assault . . . with provocation. I'm afraid, Mr. Innis, there'll have to be a charge.'

'Get on with it !' Jock said.

He couldn't keep the anger out of his voice, he didn't want to.

'We'll need witnesses.' Harris looked like a man badly needing support from superiors. 'Barman, you saw the assault ?'

'Aye. I was drawin' beer. Mr. Innis hit him. There's nae doot aboot that. He hit him square, you might say.'

'And you, MacArthur?'

The foreman made a long statement in which he seemed to be trying to prejudice himself in favour of his employer and not succeeding too well. Jock listened, with the feeling of sickness returning, wanting to get rid of the beer.

'It'll be a case for the Burgh Court,' Harris announced. 'It'll be kept in the town.'

Fat comfort in that, Jock thought, with the witnesses and their statements, the words heard. Tomorrow the witnesses would come forward all right, they were probably waiting now, the burghers, at least those who weren't dependent on the Innis family for their jobs. He looked at MacArthur then, feeling a kind of brief, bitter pity for the man's predicament, the price he was having to pay for drinking with the boss. It might be a long time before MacArthur came in again to the public of the Farmer's Rest.

'I'll be back,' Jock said, knowing he couldn't hold down the sickness any longer.

21

CLARA BLANE always tried to make Jimmy's packaged lunches tasty; she thought about them, wanting him to have a little surprise each time he unsealed the wax paper which he was to bring home in the evening for re-use. This time the surprise was radishes he had grown himself, sitting plumply on top of the processed cheese sandwiches. He bit into one and got the sharp sting of it.

'You eat those things?' Carson asked.

Carson was his chief assistant, half English, settled in Kildrudderie because he had married a local girl who wouldn't leave home.

'Aye. I grow them.'

Carson laughed. His sandwich was meat. He also avoided the canteen, being a Hi-Fi addict, with some desired new piece of equipment always on his horizon.

'You and your garden. Seen the boss this morning?'

'No,' Jimmy said, wanting to avoid the topic. He made the mistake of adding, 'The boss is in London.'

'That's what you think. You should take a jerk on yourself. The real boss is sitting in his upstairs office. He runs Scotsroofs, don't kid yourself. And it did my heart good to see him. Mind you, that eye's not shut, not quite. But there's a beautiful patch to one side of it. We can all take a lesson from what happened. Don't mix it with a Glasgow riveter, especially if you're a gentleman boxer.'

Jimmy didn't like this at all. He didn't like Carson's attitude, which never changed, that the boss class were out to do you if they could. The man had been with Scotsroofs for nine years and had no loyalty to the firm at all. He wasn't really suited to a small business, and could easily have been a shop steward in Liverpool which he regarded as a kind of heaven, the only place a sensible man would want to live.

'The town's loving this,' Carson said, filling his mouth with bread and meat.

Alice pushed open the door of the electrical shed and stood in it for a moment, a girl from the administrative block sent on an errand that was out of her role and not much liking it. She had just switched

to a new hair-do, replacing the piled mass which had a tendency to collapse with an urchin cut about which she wasn't yet happy. She didn't feel quite herself in it, really. She pretended to peer after the dazzle outside.

'Jimmy Blane?'

'Aye.'

'The boss wants you, Mr. Jock Innis. At two.'

Carson snorted.

'She knows, you see, Jimmy? The boss, eh? What about the old man, Alice?'

'Oh, him,' said Alice. 'Anyway, you've got the message. I was meant to tell you this mornin' and I forgot.'

'Pressure of work?' Carson inquired.

'Precisely. I'm just a slave these days.'

The door slammed shut. Jimmy bit into the last cheese sandwich, feeling the radishes hard in his stomach. Clara said they were full of vitamins but he had his doubts. They never seemed to settle with him, radishes.

'Now what's up?' Carson asked. 'A stepping up of unit efficiency in the electrical department?'

'There's no need to go on like that!'

'All right, all right. I'm just telling you to watch it. There'll be changes around here with boxer Jocky in the saddle. He's got American ideas. The first thing you know we'll have a time and motion expert up here with a stopwatch standing over us. Twenty guineas an hour to tell the bosses how to sweat their workers better.'

'Ah, cut it out!'

'Touchy, ain't you? You got a dream about Scotsroofs, of getting bigger, and you with it.'

That hit Jimmy on the raw, for it was his dream. He knew then he didn't meet up with his own standards for a 'departmental manager'. Already he should be just a little bit above the men directly under him, an invisible wall existing from his unchallenged authority. Somehow, though he had tried for this, he had never made it, too prone to sit down with his sandwiches next to Carson or someone else. It wouldn't do in a big business. And it could well be something that was noticed up in the main block.

Then, too, he was nervous when he approached the administrative offices, never quite able to shake off that feeling of the workman

summoned. At times he made almost daily visits to the old man's room but in it could achieve no ease at all, never quite knowing whether to sit down in the chair which was there, or to go on standing, conscious of his big hands. He knew that in his relations with the owners there was a line-up to which he ought to be able to walk with confidence, but somehow he could never see where that line was drawn, and in fear of overstepping it hung back.

At two he went up the black, plastic covered, silent stairs to the room which was a replica of the one beneath, except that it had no outer office in which you were screened by a secretary. Alice, who doubled for them both, functioned always below, and you stepped straight from the passage to the man who waited.

Jock Innis answered the knock but didn't look up at once. He was dressed in a blue suit that was almost black, with a pearl-buttoned waistcoat under it. He looked neatly packed into the low-backed, padded chair, and it was only when he lifted his head that the extent of the damage was visible.

This was considerable. A spreading bruise like a birthmark stretched from half-way under one eye around the cheekbone and almost into his hair. It gave him a vaguely dissolute air and his eyes, meeting Jimmy's, were flatly challenging. He didn't smile.

'Sit down, Blane. Over there.'

With Mr. Jock you were shown your place all right, told what to do, as though he had no doubt you wouldn't be able to decide for yourself. And today there was the added embarrassment of that vast contusion, something you mustn't seem to be looking at but shouldn't appear furtive about, either.

Jimmy sat down, unfolded his fingers and gazed at them. He noticed that for all the scrubbing he had given his nails they were still black-lined. It was a thing Clara was on to him about often, saying that he had a working man's hands and ought to take care of them. She had even bought him some kind of cream in a tube, but it sat in the bathroom cupboard unused. Somehow he couldn't bring himself to use a cream on his hands, there might be a smell that would hang on at the bench. You couldn't tell Clara what the boys in electrical would make of that.

'Cigarette, Blane?'

Jock's case was held out for him. Jimmy would have liked one, but it presented difficulties, the awkward business of getting a light

or giving one. Better to refuse and sit still, like a man who doesn't expect to be staying long.

Jock Innis pushed back in his chair. Jimmy looked at him and then down again, but from that look had an impression of someone whose remoteness from him would deepen with the years. The old man was only formidable when he was angry, but the young one put up this screen. He could sit there with his black eye from a pub fight looking like someone who inhabited another world. It left you with an aching uneasiness which even a long session didn't diminish. Somehow Jimmy knew this was going to be a long session and he didn't like that.

'The electrical department has been giving us a bit of concern, Blane.'

It was the kind of opening which, with the old man, would have made Jimmy jump on to the defensive at once, perhaps with quick protest. Now he felt oddly like an outsider listening to something which only distantly concerned him.

Jock talked for about seven minutes by the electric clock behind him, while Jimmy's eyes sought rest in that room and didn't find it. He couldn't see the point of the talk, really, all about expansion and new methods resulting from it, a new outlook needed.

'You see what I'm getting at, Blane?'

'Not exactly, sir, no. You mean we've got to take on more men? In a way I've been expecting that, of course. That is to say the expansion isn't any secret or anything. The whole town knows about America.'

'Does it? The whole town knows too damn' much!'

He was still angry about last night. It wasn't surprising, really, when you thought of it. There would probably be a pretty stink when word of all this got to the old man. Jimmy felt a certain satisfaction in that, the thought of Jock Innis who was so sure of himself on the mat in front of his father, with old Will in one of his rages, bellowing so that the typists' pool could hear every word. Alice always said she could write a book on what she heard.

'I'm not planning to expand the electrical department, Blane.'

'Eh? I'm sorry, sir. But . . . you'll have to.'

Jock Innis shook his head.

'I thought you might have jumped to the situation from what I've just told you. It's really very simple. In many ways Scotsroofs

has lagged behind the times and we've got to take up the slack. We've got to bring ourselves, with efficiency, in line with our competitors. And to do this means big changes.'

'I think I can say that the electrical is ready for any changes that could come.'

Jock Innis leaned forward and stubbed out his cigarette, looking down as he did it. He lifted his head suddenly, and his eyes seemed to have narrowed, the good one as well as the one with swollen black about it.

'There will be no electrical department in our new set-up. At least, not as we've had it in the past.'

Jimmy stared then, in astonishment not afraid to.

'But . . . I don't understand, sir? You must have . . .'

'As a matter of fact we don't, Blane. It is inefficient and uneconomic for us to run our own section here. We're streamlining for the future, as I've told you. We're going to have nearly all our work here done by Falkirk Electrical, on a contract basis.'

'I . . . just . . . don't see what you mean?'

'Really? I should have thought it plain enough. It's quite simple. We close down the electrical work we do here and have it done by a big firm who can keep costs down, with buying on a scale we can't begin to touch ourselves. They are prepared to do all our electrical side and are equipped for the expansion with us, at no outlay to Scotsroofs. You can see our position. We simply cannot afford to overlook this chance to cut costs. Every penny on our pricing schedules is vital. Where there is inefficiency we have to cut. There simply isn't a choice in this matter.'

'Mr. Innis! Are you sayin' that my department is inefficient?'

'No, Blane, not in terms of the set-up we've had here in the past. But it would be as we plan to have things for the future. We can get our electrical work done cheaper by outsiders than we can do it ourselves. That's things in a nutshell. Modern methods as opposed to only half modern ones.'

'But . . . what about my men? What about my department?'

'We're dispensing with it.'

The moment wasn't quite real to Jimmy, not at once. He sat in that room with its queer furnishings a little lost in the unreality of the thing created by words from a man sitting opposite him. It couldn't happen, not at Scotsroofs! Why, the electrical was a key department.

It had evolved techniques for prefabrication which were used all over the country now. He sat up suddenly and said this, too loudly, almost shouting it from the wilderness in which he found himself.

Jock Innis tapped a long pencil against the impeccable white blotting paper of his desk pad. He waited until there was silence in the room, a silence so deep that the sound of a van driving off was almost loud through glass walls.

'I'm sorry, Blane, this was bound to come as a shock to you. Though I did have the feeling that if you'd been watching trends generally you might have seen it coming.'

'Trends? Why should I be watching them?'

'We all have to, I'm afraid. All the time. We're caught up in them, whether we like it or not. I can tell you that we don't like what is happening; my father in particular has always clung to the idea of Scotsroofs as a little production whole within itself. It's an attractive idea, giving you the advantage of complete control in a way. But unfortunately in these times it can become uneconomic.'

The pencil went on tapping. Jimmy groped for some kind of sense in all this, pushing away while he could the immediate threatening meaning. No electrical? It just didn't make sense, it wouldn't be Scotsroofs. Why . . . the department had grown with the firm, it was essential to it in every way. You couldn't just chuck it out and bring in outsiders to do the work.

To do his work! He faced it then with a kind of inner sickening, sure suddenly that this was what the man with the blackened eye and the tapping pencil meant. They were bringing in a big concern from Falkirk to do his work, cutting him out.

'Your father wouldn't want this,' Jimmy blurted out. 'I can't believe Mr. Will Innis would want it!'

Jock straightened in his chair. If he had been a long way off before he was completely inaccessible now, withdrawn, looking at Jimmy with something that might have been contempt, as though seeing before him a man who didn't really belong in his time at all.

'My father has concurred in this decision, Blane. He had no choice. Naturally he feels badly about it in a way. It's somewhat against his earlier policies. But he sees these have to change.'

Jimmy had somehow lost control, in a kind of panic which didn't recognize deference any longer.

'Funny you should be doing this when he's in London!'

'That will do, Blane!'

There was silence then, but no tapping pencil. Jimmy couldn't look at the young man behind the desk, suddenly hating him, the feeling deep and personal, as though long dormant but now allowed in, a bitter, angry distrust. This was all Jock Innis's doing, something put over on the old man. It was the end of the old days, and this man represented the new ones coming in. Jimmy was afraid with his hate. He stared now at the carpet in front of the desk.

'What are we to do then? Wind up the department?'

That was Jock's cue.

'It doesn't actually need much winding up, Blane. Falkirk will be taking over on Monday.'

'Monday! Oh, my God! Is there no time then?'

Jock looked a little uneasy, with Jimmy suddenly gazing at him.

'We knew this was bound to be a shock to you, Blane. And we're sorry it had to be done suddenly like this. As a matter of fact I told my father it was the best way. You wouldn't want us to fool you about the basic situation.'

'I'm sacked then?'

'Not exactly thrown out on your ear. My father and I discussed compensation. You've worked well for us, but you've also been well paid for an electrician.'

'I ran the department, didn't I?'

'Yes, if you can call it a department. I shouldn't.'

'I've worked here for fifteen years. I gave up my own business in the High Street to come to Scotsroofs. I did it because I thought it would better my chances.'

'I think you probably did better your chances. I doubt if you would have had profits from your shop anything like what we paid you. Though perhaps you can prove us wrong here.'

'What do you mean by that?'

'Well . . . there's nothing to stop you opening that shop in the town now. And to do that . . .'

'So there's nothing to stop me opening my shop? Listen! I'm forty-four. Is that the age to start a new business on your own?'

'Why not, with your experience?'

'Look here, Mr. Innis, when I opened up in the High Street it was after the war. There wasn't another proper electrician's business in the town. I had a chance to build up then. But I know what it's

like now down there. Henderson's have moved in, a chain lot, who can undercut the little man all right. And there's the Electricity Board doing half the installations about here. Even the builders are using them. I'd have to compete against them from scratch. I haven't a hope in hell!

'I think you're being pessimistic, Blane. And if you can't open up on your own in this town why . . . you're a trained man. And with this compensation we're prepared to give you there will be time for you to look around.'

'What's this compensation you talk about?' Jimmy asked loudly.

'Three hundred and fifty pounds.'

Jock somehow contrived to make the figure sound enormous, practically intoning it, as though an extreme of uncalled-for generosity not only absolved Scotsroofs of a human responsibility but in a way set it on the side of the angels. There was no legal need to pay Blane a penny, as the man knew well.

Jimmy sat very still, with three hundred and fifty pounds his whole future in that moment. He could see the claims on that money already waiting, H.P. payments on the house, the furniture, the car and somewhere along at the end what they put in their stomachs. It was no future at all, really, not even a layer of time between him and waiting desolation. It was Jimmy who held the silence, looking at what was in his hands and seeing it wither.

Jock broke that silence.

'For a man of your ability I'd suggest a move, Blane. We'll give you the highest recommendations, of course. What about Glasgow?'

'Aye, Glasgow. I've got my house here, haven't I?'

'Houses can be sold. Especially a Scotsroofs house.'

It was a little joke. The damn' bastard was sitting there making his little joke! He heard Clara's voice then, Clara holding her hopes tight . . . 'We're getting on, Jimmy, aren't we? We're getting on.' Aye, they had been getting on all right, to this.

The man behind the desk could never imagine a blank wall in another's life. Old Will Innis might have done, but not this one. And he was the power now, strong enough to do a thing like this while the old man was away, strong enough to worm the permission to do it out of an old fool who was done, and whose way of doing things was done, too.

There was no use in wailing, Jimmy knew that. He should have

been watching trends, like a smart man, not counting on loyalty worth much in these days. It was worth three hundred and fifty pounds for fifteen years. God! And Jock Innis could sit there looking like a devil with his black eye, telling a sacked workman how to go about picking up the smashed pieces of his living.

Carson was right, you wanted to be in something big, with the Unions fighting for you, not putting your trust in bosses you saw every day in their fancy rooms. Carson looked at the trends. He wouldn't even be surprised, it would give him an excuse to get out of a town he didn't like anyway. And Carson lived in a Council house, with no payments to be met, just the rent, he hadn't been bothered with getting on in the way Clara wanted. He probably had money in the bank to put alongside his compensation.

Departmental Manager! God, what a fool! What a bloody fool!

'I can see all this has been an upset, Blane. I'm sorry about that...'

Jimmy stood, over the desk, looking down.

'Damn you! Damn your whole lousy crew!'

And then he went out, down the silent stairs, out across the landscaped piece to the workrooms, through a world that had no reality, that was misted with a remoteness brought by terror, nothing here he could reach out and touch and find whole to himself. There was nothing he had any claim on, or that claimed him, the stranger walking a path walked before five thousand times.

He went into the workshop and told Carson, in a loud steady voice, Carson turning slowly from the bench to listen to him, putting down a length of plastic covered cable.

'The dirty f---s,' Carson said simply.

Eliza Innis was a bad driver at the best of times, but when angry a car became a kind of projectile under her hands. She was angry now as she pushed the Hillman up towards Rosemount, revving wildly at the one necessary change down, swinging perilously near one of the uprights of the ever open gates. The tyres churned up weeds with gravel on the drive. She slammed the door when she was out.

The house sat waiting for her with its long façade dull and ponderous even in the morning sunlight, the windows like eyes with the life gone from behind them. She went up the shallow steps flanked by

delicate wrought iron, now rusting, and pulled the old bell, hearing a distant, lost clang.

The long wait she expected but Hester's appearance was a surprise, a woman dressed for the morning as though she spent a lot of it on her knees scrubbing. She was wearing no make-up and her hair straggled. She stood very straight as always, and didn't have to make any effort for composure.

'Well, Eliza, pity you didn't warn me on the phone. I've been doing out cupboards.'

'May I come in?'

The phrase had a middle-class ring in Eliza's ears, and she knew she should have waited for the invitation.

'Of course. We'll use Hamish's study.'

It was a dead room, too, Eliza thought, looking around, even if the place they used most. On a table was a heap of library books and a portable radio. The cushions in both the chairs by an extinct fire hadn't been fluffed up since bodies had pressed them down. A bowl of lupins and delphinium in the window needed changing and you could sense a layer of dust even without looking for it.

'Do sit down,' Hester said.

'I've come about the wedding.'

Eliza put out her hands to the table, almost in protest at the idea of a seat in this room, her fingers touching it. It seemed to her then that Hester looked gaunt, that was the only word for it, as though she had been caught without the mask she wore usually, and realizing this hadn't bothered with any half-compromise. She must know that her hair was wispy, but her fingers didn't seek for loose strands.

'What about the wedding, Eliza?'

'Sheina's been on to me. To cancel our plans. To have it quietly. I know where that idea came from.'

'You mean from me, via Colin?'

'Yes.'

'I did think it might be a good idea under the circumstances.'

Hester picked up a packet of twenty Players from the table and held it out. Eliza shook her head, but waited until Hester had hers going.

'What circumstances?'

Hester smiled briefly.

'Really, Eliza, must we go into that?'

'I want to hear why you suggest giving up all our plans and having a quiet wedding. In Perth, wasn't it?'

'Yes, I thought Perth would be a good place. Perhaps the regimental chapel.'

'The regimental chapel may mean a lot to you, but it doesn't mean a thing to us!'

Hester smiled again.

'You mean our parish church is dear to you, Eliza?'

'Well . . . we have a claim on it! But why do you want this?'

'Isn't it utterly obvious? Firstly, my husband has got into a bit of a mess and he's not mad on public appearances at the moment. Secondly, your son had a pub fight in the town which was apparently in defence of Elsie Garr's honour.'

'You can leave Jock out of this!'

'That's not so easy, seeing he was to be best man. Really, Eliza, aren't there times when it is best to look at facts? I'd say this was one of them. It seems to me that a gala wedding would be most inopportune at the moment, for both our families. You still think we should go through with it?'

'I want Sheina to have the kind of wedding that she'll remember. A proper one.'

'I should think if we stage it in Kilrudderie just now she'll remember it all right. Maybe you haven't noticed, but the feeling in the town about both our lots is . . . well . . . hostile to put it mildly. They haven't forgiven Hamish for that field and, of course, the Jock business is giving the gossips the best gala in years. Is Elsie Garr going to stay on, do you know?'

'I don't know anything about her. And I don't want to. She's nothing to me. She's nothing to Jock either. I don't see why we have to make a lot of that.'

Hester laughed.

'You mean we just regard it as a little peccadillo, the sort of thing one expects from the male? Unfortunate, dear, but do have another cup of tea?'

'Stop mocking me!'

'Really, what an extraordinary thing to say.'

'Maybe. But you always have. Did you imagine that I didn't know? Oh, I realize that I've asked for it in my way. I've been busy,

haven't I, trying to get in with the right people? Quite comic when you look at it from inside.'

'Inside? You mean I'm inside?'

'As if you didn't know. As if you haven't always been. And I daresay I was really very funny. There was that little story about my lounge. You remember? I called it a lounge at first. All the books on U-speech weren't out then, I didn't know that it should be a sitting-room, or even a drawing-room, but never a lounge. "Lizzie's Loonge" . . . that's what you called it. If you want to know, I heard you say that to someone at a party in my house.'

Hester took a deep breath.

'I'm sorry,' she said, as though she meant it. 'I can be a bitch.'

Eliza was unnerved, her anger thinned. She wanted to hold on to it in this house, needing the strength it gave her.

'It's Sheina I'm thinking of. I'm not defending Jock, I never have. He'll go his own way. I can't stop him and I'm not trying. Maybe that's partly what's wrong, I didn't try to stop him long ago. I had so much on my hands, getting where I was going, where we could use Will's money.'

She hadn't meant to talk like this to Hester; it wasn't part of the thing she had come here to say. Hester was sitting now on the edge of the table, as though she needed to give her body that support. She looked older than Eliza had ever seen her, much older, and in that vulnerable. It was incredible to see Hester without the defences she always wore.

'Eliza, you really want to go on with the wedding plans as they are?'

'Yes.'

'You may be the only one who wants that. I don't think Sheina cares.'

'Sheina will do what Colin tells her.'

'Really? I'm surprised! Not like an Innis. Am I going to have a docile daughter-in-law? Supposing I go on opposing the present plans? What would you do?'

The question came softly, reaching across the gulf of their antagonism, challenging honesty, daring it. Hester seemed profoundly interested at this approach to truth between them, as though for the first time she was looking for the living human being behind the

façade Eliza had built so painfully and with such determination. And Eliza met the challenge. The truth diminished her in dignity but she used it.

'I meant to let people know about Blae Hill and how your husband had made money from it.'

'I see. Blackmail. How did you find out? I wouldn't have thought you knew much about your husband's business affairs.'

'I suspected something more than the Colonel just doing us a good turn. So I dug it out of Will. I can get anything I want out of him when I try.'

Hester laughed.

'I can believe it. Any lengths for a white wedding. A straight ultimatum to me, eh?'

'It sounds horrible, I know. I don't think I'd have done it. I know I wouldn't.'

Hester shook her head.

'Don't let's spoil things by starting to whitewash ourselves. You'd have done it all right. Your determination is extraordinary. I think I've always admired it. Perhaps that's why I bothered to be bitchy. You and I have one thing in common; we both belong to a generation in which women could still devote all their lives and energy to complete folly.'

'It's Sheina's happiness I'm after. I'm too old to care for myself. But I want her to have all the things I haven't.'

'I know. It's an old story. Eliza, do sit down. I'm going to.'

They sat in chairs opposite each other, Hester lying back. She closed her eyes for a moment.

'Will you go on fighting for both of them?' she asked.

'Whatever do you mean?'

'Oh . . . just that they may need it. Even when they're married and have each other. They're not madly practical either of them. Colin is a bit isolated in his little military world that isn't really very important any more. And Sheina, for an Innis, has her head in the clouds a bit. She's very young for her years.'

'I know. I want to make things safe for her if I can.'

'You will, if it's possible. I'll be quite frank, Eliza; it's Jock I'm thinking of as the threat to their safety.'

'Yes.'

'Almost odd, isn't it, how little we need to explain things to each

other? I want a decent life for Colin, too. I've done what I could there.'

'You can go on doing it,' Eliza said.

For a moment Hester said nothing at all.

'No, you're wrong there, I can't. You see, I'm going to die. In six or nine months.'

Hester's voice was flat, matter of fact, as though she was determinedly avoiding the dramatic in this statement, but she wasn't successful. Her words hung in the room between them, in a silence through which Eliza sat frozen.

'I won't try to block your wedding plans,' Hester said. 'It just seemed to me suddenly an unnecessary ordeal, that's all. But I'm probably wrong there. Maybe it would be a kind of defeat to give up, and we ought to go on. It's just that I've been feeling suddenly on the sidelines, you know, lifted up and put down somewhere else. An odd kind of perspective.'

Eliza's mouth felt dry.

'Surely . . . they can do something . . . ?'

'It's one of those too late things.'

'Oh, my God!'

'Eliza, please don't be like that. I didn't tell you because I . . . It's just that you'll be alone as far as Colin and Sheina are concerned. If anyone had said this morning that I'd have told you . . . well . . .'

'There must be some way!'

'No. I've been to the best man in Edinburgh. There isn't. Hamish doesn't know yet. The only people who know in Kilrudderie are you and our bouncing Doctor. Don't ask me why I haven't told Hamish. I'm not sure I could answer. It's perhaps that I don't want panic round me. Oh, I had it myself at first. Very sharply indeed. And then in a way I seemed to settle down with this curious perspective. I'm not really afraid at the moment at all. I don't say that I won't be again. But just at the moment I'm in a kind of calm, looking out from a window at the world I used to be in.'

'Please . . . !'

'You have a kind heart, Eliza. It's something I never realized before. I've abused you in my way, haven't I?'

'It doesn't matter.'

'It did. I'm sorry.'

'Please, don't talk about it!'

'Change your mind and have a cigarette. And give me another.'
'All right.'

Eliza went over with the packet and matches. Hester smiled at her over the flame, and Eliza began to cry, silently, but not able to stop the tears. She sat down in the vacuum made by her helplessness, her purpose in coming drained away, made nothing. She felt small and mean and diminished, wanting now to give and having no power to do it, Hester having so far found all the strength she needed for her ordeal. It was almost unbearable to think of the normal pattern going on in this house, deliberately maintained by Hester for as long as it could be, with her husband not guessing, probably still nursing an almost small boy sulk against a world which he thought had treated him badly. And when he did know what use would he be? It was his shock and panic that would have to be dealt with then.

Eliza understood, with a sudden small bitterness, why Hester was keeping silent. It wasn't really a question of choice at all, just a need to keep breathing the normal air of her life for as long as this could be contrived. It was a woman's instinct to take the known and tuck it round you for comfort because you had no other.

JIMMY BLANE had got his cheque all right, through the post, three hundred and fifty pounds, and signed by Will Innis back from London, so the old man knew. There was also the letter of recommendation which was in Jimmy's pocket now, with words about faithful service and redundancy due to reorganization. Jimmy had asked Clara what some of the words meant, staring at them, and she had sniffled over her replies. He had walked straight from the factory into the disaster which was waiting for him at the Scotsroofs bungalow on the hill, waiting with Clara and her lemon sole fried crisply for tea. There had been a peak in disaster when he had shouted and she had wept and then they had gone to bed, neither to sleep or to take comfort in love, but to lie as sudden strangers side by side in a dead world.

Then had come the stirring back to living, the need to take action, to move beyond the hard edges of anger. He had been glad to escape to Glasgow, to get away from that little house which seemed tenanted only by ghosts, Clara with a new white patience, a kind of waiting meekness, pushing the initiative on to him and only protesting finally at his decision.

She hated Glasgow, she said, and couldn't live there. It was no place to bring up children, especially two children. They had argued around the boldness of his plan, Clara frightened by it, as he was frightened himself. But he had gone.

And in Glasgow, on the fourth day, he found the job, thirteen pounds ten a week, much less than he had been getting, a cut back to them of ten years in planning. He would have little authority now, but would be protected by his Union, one of many in a huge concern where there was a kind of strength in corporate resistance to the bosses. Any redundancy due to reorganization would cause a stink in the papers and questions asked in Parliament. You would be safe enough if you gave up your ideas of getting on and put your name down on the long list for a Council house. In the end they might get a flat and Clara would have modern things about her again. Jimmy might even get over this feeling of

being used and spent, able to fight to get on, to become a foreman.

The diesel bucketed along the branch line, jouncing with a curious softness on its new springs and the whole sensation of riding in it was made strange by the view ahead from that leading car. The bored driver in clean overalls, also protected by his Union, sat under the public eye in a neat cabin, pushing his modern train at speed around well banked bends. He squirmed sometimes, and looked about him, and once on a long straight took time out to clean his ear with his finger-nail. Jimmy sat up on his seat, staring at the rails glistening after a shower and the telephone poles leaping at them from around corners.

He wasn't free of fear yet, the fear that had walked with him on the Glasgow pavements and which came partly from a consciousness of age. He had been made sharply aware of his age in the smaller concerns with their neat little contributory pension schemes where he hoped for the better sort of job. But at forty-four the assets of his experience were measured against the liabilities of taking on a man so much past his prime, and he had been up against a kind of wall of only moderately applied politeness. It wasn't going to be easy explaining to Clara that it wasn't just experience which counted. She had been so confident that he would land something as a foreman, when he had been a Departmental Manager. What a fool he had been to take that rank on himself, assuming a false position under his own roof, something not recognized at the works at all. It was the kind of pride you couldn't account for easily, any more than you could make your wife understand just how difficult it was . . . even when you were seeing the boss every day . . . to bring up that little matter of an increase in your pay. You meant to and you waited for the right moment, but just when you thought it had come you were dismissed and you couldn't somehow challenge that.

You were a big man when you were mowing your own grass in front of your shiny new house, but one knock and everything fell away.

Jimmy Blane, electrician, that's what he was. That was his Union rating and it would stick. Glasgow was a tough world and you had to be a real pusher to get noticed. He didn't believe any more that he was a pusher at all. He thought of swearing at the young boss, standing by that desk to do it, and the recollection made him shiver.

Kilrudderie looked a toy station as the diesel bore down on it, two platforms set beside a child's length of track. The driver took off his cap to scratch his head, then pressed the siren button, sending a weird, echoing wail up against the hills. These were already night-shadowed by mist, cloud coming almost low enough to cut off the top level of lights where the white house waited for him. He stared up towards it until the final hiss of airbrakes and the last jolt and people scurrying suddenly on the platform made him rise.

Jimmy walked through the lower section of the town not looking at the people in the streets. He disowned the place already, cut off from it, a man with a job in Glasgow, and climbing the last hill he wished suddenly that it was dark enough for that familiar approach to his own door to be hidden. He had to muster a kind of strength then, shaking himself back into an approximation of the man Clara would be expecting, the trained man with his knowledge of a trade behind him who could always find his place in the world. Clara mustn't see tire or defeat in his eyes, or sense the clinging despair he hadn't quite escaped that came from the sound of your feet on pavements when everyone around was going faster than you were.

'Jimmy,' she said, holding back the door wide. 'Oh, Jimmy!'

'Hiya, Clara.'

Her arms went round him. The response to that somehow didn't come quickly, but he kissed her.

'How's the kiddie?'

'Lucy's in her bed. I gave her supper and put her to bed. She's asleep, but if you'd like . . . ?'

'No, it's fine. I'll see her later.'

His eyes were doing a kind of inventory of the things in his house, of what was really theirs and what wasn't. It seemed suddenly that there was precious little they could say belonged to them.

'I'll get your tea ready, Jimmy. How about me bringing it into the lounge and you can . . . watch the telly?'

'Are you no asking me about my job?'

He heard her draw in her breath.

'You've . . . got one? In Glasgow?'

'Aye.'

'Oh, Jimmy! You didn't even try Perth like you promised?'

'What the hell's the good of Perth to a man in my trade?'

He hadn't meant to flare into the defensive like this. He hadn't seen Clara for five days. It was the longest they had ever been parted and he had somehow been counting on a tenderness from this, something he could use. Looking at his wife then he couldn't see the tenderness.

'I'm bloody tired,' he told her.

'Oh . . . you go and sit down. I'll give you tea. I'll . . .'

She turned away quickly into the kitchenette. She closed the door, and he knew it was so he wouldn't see her tears. The sense of the gulf between them was still there, and she hadn't even asked about his job, not wanting to hear.

He went into the sitting-room and stood just beyond the door looking at it, staring at the modern furnishings, the glass wall to the patio, all like something you would see in the pictures, or an exhibition, not the home of a thirteen-pound-ten electrician at all. He had never really become used to this room and he felt an intruder in it now. It was like a place on which they had left no real impression at all as a family, its newness not tarnished. Even the climbing plant that Clara had bought after reading about it in some magazine looked weird and neutral in his eyes.

He sat in a chair which had developed no hollows from his use and never would. The telly was on, those comfortable English voices and the men who all looked somehow as though they had just come from a big meal and would soon be going to another. He stared and listened for something to do, while he waited.

Clara beyond a closed door was almost certainly thinking about Glasgow, about what a move there was going to mean to them. But what other hope was there? Bitterness swelled in him. What the hell did a woman know about what a man went through? It was his job to do the worrying, to find the way, and hers to wait and dust and polish the sink. What would Clara ever know of walking pavements with the feeling that you were in a world all tight and sealed off, not a crack in it for you anywhere? You kept back what you felt, the sick feeling, the loneliness of the damned.

Thirteen pounds ten. It wasn't going to be easy to tell her for she thought the big city was a place where you at least got more money. A lot she knew about the city and its hard face.

He thought of the derelicts, the throw-outs, men under railway arches and on the pavements, shuffling when they had to move, men

in these days of plenty who looked like they had never smelt it. They might have been anything once, might have had training, too, and got old.

Jimmy lit a cigarette. Clara would chide him for doing that, wasting a cigarette when he knew food was coming. He looked up as she came through the door with the tray, his eyes ready to challenge anything in hers, and then he saw her smile. It was a worked-over smile, put on in the kitchenette for coming through a door. It told of defeat and fear for her, too, and something turned in his stomach.

'Clara . . . !'

She put down the tray carefully and stood looking at him for a second or two. Then she came running, caught in his arms, really held this time.

'Oh, Jimmy, it was terrible with you away. Oh, I couldn't bear it. I couldn't bear the nights.'

'I know, hen, I know.'

She put her hands on his cheeks, looking at him.

'I kept thinking about you all the time. I knew you were in Glasgow. You might have sent me a card, though.'

'I thought about it. But there was nothing to say, was there? I just got my job and came home. It's no a bad job, Clara; there's chances in it, you see. To get on, I mean . . . '

'I don't want to hear about it. Not just yet. I've . . . been thinking. While you were away, Jimmy. There's the money from the firm. And . . . and I've got a little.'

'Eh?'

'Don't look like that, Jimmy. It's just housekeeping money. I knew if I'd told you about it before you'd be angry, when we were tight all the time. But I saved here and there. Little bits. I've got forty-seven pounds in the Post Office.'

'That'll help now. With the move.'

'No! Listen to me, Jimmy. Seriously. You've got to listen. There's a little shop off the High Street. The rent's nothing much. We could meet it all right. I . . . I went to see it. It would need a lot of paint but we could do it ourselves, we know all about that.'

'You mean a shop in Kilrudderie? Are you daft?'

'Jimmy, don't be like that. Just listen to me. The money we've got would give us a start. And it would let us stay here. In our house, Jimmy. We wouldn't have to move. That's going to be an expense

and we can cut it out, if you'll just listen. I know the way you work, Jimmy. You'd build up a business soon. . . .'

He stood, almost pushing her off him to do it. He went to the glass wall and glared through it for a moment. Then he swung around, the anger twisting his face.

'There's a woman for you! Keep this house. My Gawd! I earned near twenty pounds at Scotsroofs. And we needed every penny of it to keep goin' in this place. Just to pay what we owed every week. How in hell's name am I going to make twenty pounds clear out of a business I've just started? Or ten pounds? Or five? We'd eat up the money we've got, and nothin' to show for it, that's all. Don't tell me what I could do here in Kilmallock with my own business. I know too damn' well what it would be like. Six months and we'd be out on our necks, owing everybody.'

'No, Jimmy, no! We'd sell the car. I'd help in the shop. I could do a lot. I could take Lucy down during the day when you were out.'

'We can't do it, I tell you. There's no way we can stay in this town. And I don't want to. I'm sick to my guts of Kilmallock. I'm glad we're getting out. Aye, and we're going to live in a different way in Glasgow. Not all this hire purchase. It's just round our necks, that's all it is. There's not been a penny coming in this house that's our own. We'll get furnished rooms in Glasgow. When we've got rid of all this . . . every damn' thing.'

Clara was very pale, white and still. She touched the back of a chair with both hands, looking at her husband.

'It . . . doesn't mean anything to you?'

'Why the hell should it? I've sweated my guts out, haven't I? It's all I've been doin' for years. I want free, do you hear? I want to cut it out.'

'You want free . . . in Glasgow?'

'Aye? Why not? People live there, don't they? Maybe they live wi'oot the fancy ideas we've been havin'. Well, we can get rid o' our fancy ideas. Other folks has had to do it before us. And now I'll take ma tea. I need it.'

Jimmy Blane was conscious of a kind of reversion in himself, a new role waiting he had only to step into. He would be the electrician who came home with his pay packet and gave ten pounds to his wife for the rent and food and clothes, keeping three pounds ten shillings in his own pocket for beer money and the dogs. It would be a

shake to her getting to know about living like that, but she'd learn.

He didn't look at her as he ate, stuffing in the food, staring at the play which had just come on, trying that way to lose his consciousness of Clara's presence in the room, and her silence. On the screen were eight people in a Cornish inn, all with plenty of money and half of them worrying about their souls. Jimmy glared at them. The fat man had a fur collar on his overcoat to show how rich he was and he had a wife who was a bitch.

After a little Clara took the tray and went into the kitchenette with it. Her going wasn't an immediate relief, he began to become more and more aware of her with that closed door between them. There were no sounds at all of washing up beyond the din from the set. Finally, impelled by feeling he didn't understand, he got up and went across the room, opening the door quietly.

Clara was sitting on a high stool by her shiny fitted sink unit, leaning on it, her head down on her arms. She didn't seem to hear the increased noise from the television at all, off somewhere alone where sound didn't reach. Jimmy had the sense then of her isolation as something he had made, something built up from his shouting. He remembered about the child she was carrying.

'Hen . . . ?' he said.

She lifted her head slowly, turning that white face. He was somehow reminded of Lucy, the child's waxy pallor that the sun never seemed to touch at all.

'Clara . . . I blew my top. I'm sorry.'

She shook her head.

'I think it's me. I . . . I've always wanted things nice. I've always been like that.'

'I ken.'

'But it doesn't make sense to you, does it, Jimmy? You don't see things the way I do. I can't see anything else, you know that? I mean, I look around here at all this and . . . and I just can't see anything else. Not for me. I know it's got to be, but I can't see it.'

'You're not to fret now, Clara. You're just to stop it.'

She looked at him.

'Can you see anything else, Jimmy?'

'Of course. . . .'

And then he stopped. He knew what she meant. The house was unreal to him in a way, and the things in it, and it had always been

so. But it was his life, too. Everything new put under this roof was part of the planning now wiped out. They mightn't need the things that were here, they could do without the lot, but he knew what Clara meant. He couldn't see anything else, either.

It gave him a cold feeling standing there in a doorway with the television thundering behind him.

Eliza, in reflective mood, drove a car with erratic caution, observing road signs, speed limits, watching intersections with an almost painful intensity for miles and then, revolting against her own maintained temperance, suddenly accelerating down a hill with a bend in it, then challenged to overtake an older model and doing it, whizzing by too fast, her speedometer flicking up to sixty-five and her car developing just that slight feeling of being beyond complete and easy control. This would make her brake down again to fifty and the older model would pass her, the commercial traveller in it muttering towards his driving mirror. She would stick to decorum again for perhaps ten miles until irritated by an articulated lorry doing forty-eight and belching out diesel smoke. Her efforts to get past this would be as determined as a wasp bent on stinging, and as easily deflected, little whining surges forward beaten back by oncoming traffic. Twice Eliza had been fined for careless driving. One of her cars, after a skid, had landed in a field with its wheels in the air. She had broken her string of Japanese cultured pearls and her sun-glasses.

When driving alone Eliza sometimes talked out loud, a running commentary on the follies of her fellow road users, but coming back from Perth a week after Hester had sat in an old leather chair and spoken of death Eliza was silent. She had layered over shock from this staggering intimacy with a bustle that was both for herself and for Hester. In her mind Hester was now a kind of passenger leaving at the next port of call and it was up to the crew who stayed with the ship to surround her with a slightly unnatural luxury of shelter and protection. The Hester of that morning was put away carefully, and Eliza's pity had become almost brisk.

There was so much to be done. Sheina couldn't be called unco-operative about the wedding, but she was oddly withdrawn, seeking out the company of her lover, even if this meant spending long hours in Perth. She was certainly leaving all arrangements to her mother,

beyond fittings for her dress. They had decided against a formal rehearsal, and though this irked Eliza somewhat she saw the sense of it. There was no use in attracting extra attention to a wedding that was going to take place in an atmosphere that could only be called very peculiar indeed.

It was Eliza's experience that Kilrudderie went through phases of near violence; there were years of a kind of torpor, a somnolence, when the pattern had a decorum one felt would never be challenged, the populace lived and died decently and the corporate body of the town appeared to have the moderate glow of middle-aged good health. Then, suddenly, the explosions began, a sequence of them, as though volcanic in origin, with emotional earthquakes increasing in force until there was something in the air that bordered on only just controlled panic, a feeling in the streets and houses of people waiting for more, for the bigger shock.

It all passed, of course, the quietness returning. Eliza told herself that it was passing this time, and the tension she felt still was part of family involvement which had been so deep and painful. The wedding would be the start of peace again, the end of the sequence.

She thought about that sequence and though she didn't set this squarely in her mind, it seemed to begin somewhere about Jock's return, as if this was a signal. Absurd, of course, it was no such thing, but she knew in her heart that she would be glad when he had gone back to America. It might be strange for a mother to hope that her son would settle on another continent, but she did. She wanted him to outgrow roots in Kilrudderie quickly and for good, leaving the rest of them to get back to something he had disrupted. She couldn't look at Jock and feel his flesh her own, she had never been able to, almost as though there was a physical resentment against him as well as a mental one.

Eliza's fears were for her daughter. Sheina had been too carefully screened from the real world and had no experience to draw on when brought up against the kind of pervasive, penetrating bitterness that was about them as a family now. Eliza knew her responsibility here, for she had worked to keep her daughter apart and safe, never foreseeing a time when public anger would sweep around them and the only protection against it was indifference.

Eliza herself didn't have quite this indifference, but what Kilrudderie thought had never seemed important to her, perhaps

because she had grown up against a continuing minor hostility from it. The Bains were never well regarded, a pushing family with pride that wasn't matched by economic status, and this had made them something of a target. She knew perfectly well that she had gone on being a target when she married Will, but Sheina had been the big man's daughter always protected by that, never realizing that the sweetness of her world was paid for with money and the power from it.

She was realizing it now in a way, startled to find in the streets and shops of the town that being the old man's daughter was no longer a ticket for the special smile and the little flurries of particular attention. Kilrudderie had grown lumpish and sulky, taking recent happenings as more than something to be savoured in talk and pub laughter. The townspeople were adding old bitterness to the new one of Ferguson's field and making an imposing heap of their resentments.

The quickest way home was to go through part of Kilrudderie half-way down the High Street to a sharp left turn where there were traffic lights. But Eliza didn't take this route; just beyond the town sign she swung into a detour amongst the quieter residential roads where the passing of her bright and glittering car wasn't so likely to be noticed. She changed down to pass through the round stone pillars supporting the gates and then saw another car in the drive, coming towards her.

It was a police car, black and powerful, the radio mast up. Eliza pulled into the side to let it pass but it stopped parallel to her, a sergeant she recognized behind the wheel. For a moment he just looked at her, and there was silence beyond two engines ticking over.

'A bit of trouble I'm afraid, Mrs. Innis.'

The Sergeant spoke deliberately, taking his time. He had a fleshy face and his bulky shoulders were hunched. He looked an athletic man gone a little to seed from too much driving. His voice was slow Scots, the accent remaining, but the native idioms mostly erased.

'What is it?' Eliza asked. She felt a panic from his calm, the ponderousness of it. 'Not one of my family? Not something wrong?'

'Not one of your family, Mrs. Innis. No. But a sad business. Does the name Blane mean anything to you?'

'Blane? There's a Blane working at Scotsroofs. An electrician. Jimmy Blane, that's it. A kind of foreman.'

'Aye. He gassed himself. And his family.'

'He . . . what?'

'Aye. We didn't find them until nearly noon. A neighbour spotted the milk. The Fiscal's been over. Quite a business, as you can imagine.'

'Jimmy Blane? But they had that . . . new house.'

'Aye. A Scotsroofs house. Did you know he'd been given the sack?'

Something made Eliza cautious then. This man was probing.

'No.'

'Apparently that's what happened. About two weeks ago. Redundant, it seems. He left a note.'

Eliza was suddenly stiff with fear.

'I scarcely knew the man,' she said, pushing this away. 'I used to nod to his wife, that's all. Why are you here?'

'The note seemed to lead to your husband in a kind of a way. We're conducting our investigations, you'll understand. There's no doubt about suicide, of course. The verdict's a foregone conclusion there.'

'Are they all . . . dead?'

'Aye. All dead. Easy enough to do, too, once it's decided on. If you have a gas fire in the bedroom. The wife couldn't have known, that's what we think. And he carried the wee girl into the bedroom sleeping, or that's what it looks like.'

'Please. . . .'

'You seem upset, Mrs. Innis? I thought you didn't really know them? You didn't hear your husband say anything ever about Jimmy Blane?'

'No. Never. He never talks at home about things at the works. Not to me.'

'I see. Well, that's something I wanted to know. You'll not be deeply concerned then. I'm afraid your husband is, however.'

'What do you mean?'

'I think he blames himself in a kind of way. Blane worked at Scotsroofs for fifteen years, after all. You might have said he was settled there. At least, that's the way it would look to someone on the outside.'

Eliza was suddenly seeing her husband and his role in this. If Jimmy Blane had been sacked there must have been good reason, very good reason. Unless Jock . . . ?

Fear still held her. She said, her voice almost crisp,
‘Sergeant, are you questioning me? If you are . . . I think I
have a right to know what was in that note. Will you let me see it?’

He considered this.

‘I could, I suppose.’

He brought out a wallet, opened it carefully, and pulled out a sheet of paper. He had only to hold out his hand to let it reach Eliza’s driving window. She took the note.

It was printed, as though by a man who didn’t trust his own writing, slightly wobbly lettering in pencil.

‘I am sorry to cause trouble. But we can’t do with things like they are. My wife and kiddie did not know. I did it to them. James Blane.’

Eliza pressed one hand against her mouth, hard against it.

‘Have you any comment on that note, Mrs. Innis?’

‘No. I didn’t know them, I tell you.’

‘I’ll take it then.’

There were questions she wanted to ask. And then she began to get the answers herself. The reporters would be on to this and tomorrow’s papers splashing it, an old employee of Scotsroofs, recently sacked, killing himself and his family. Coming on top of the business of Ferguson’s field it would make black headlines . . . and these against the Innis family. It would be on the Scottish radio news, sent out in only a few minutes. And down there the town would be shaking with a whipped up anger.

It was what Kilrudderie would want just now, almost what it needed, more fuel for this fire, to send it flaring up again.

‘You can’t help us in any way then, Mrs. Innis?’

‘No.’

‘You might tell your husband that Inspector Hudson will likely be calling later this evening for a statement. I forgot to tell Mr. Innis. Good night.’

The police car crunched away, very quietly. She scarcely heard its smooth acceleration out on the road.

The engine of the Hillman was still running. Eliza put in the gear and let the car pull itself up towards the house, turning slowly amongst the carefully planted spruces. These sent out their exclusive, aromatic scent best just at this hour when the evening damp first touched them.

She braked at the door, but sat still, her hands in her lap, remembering her denial of knowing the Blanes. It wasn't true, of course; she knew them all right, and Clara Blane was suddenly real to her, a little woman tending towards plumpness, neatly dressed when you met her shopping in the town, down from her new house on the hill. Jimmy, too, she had seen often, he had done some re-wiring here once and kept coming for several days, a man in overalls moving about Eliza's bedroom with a kind of caution as though he was afraid he might break something. She had given him a cup of tea in the dining-room, and he stood to drink it, not wanting to spoil the chairs by sitting down.

The Sergeant had understood the reasons for her denial, and she had his contempt. It was horrible to have earned it.

Eliza got out of the car and went into the house she had so carefully padded over the years, into its curious softness through which sound didn't travel at all. And there was no hint of voices now, nothing to suggest order upset, just the faint smell of polish and Chinese carpets like cushions under her feet. She opened the door to the sitting-room.

The fire had been newly lit and was only beginning to burn up. In a wing chair sat Will, his head back, his eyes closed. Jock was at the mantelpiece, leaning on it, a glass in one hand. Sheina was in a small brocaded tub chair, looking too big for it. There was a kind of defiance in the way she was staying on in the acute, immediate circle of family shame and anger.

Eliza moved into it, too, at once.

'I spoke to the Sergeant on the drive,' she said. 'I know about the Blanes.'

Will turned his head against the chair back, looking at her. At another time she would have been shocked by what was in his eyes, but now she ignored it, her own look for Jock.

'You fired him?' she asked flatly.

Jock moved a little, in a kind of irritation.

'Mother, I don't want to go into all this again. Sheina's been asking these questions.'

'She had a right to ask them. So do I!'

Jock put down his glass, moving a little piece of Dresden carefully to do it.

'We did not fire Blane in the way you mean. We didn't need him

any more. But we paid him a reasonable compensation. Look . . . I don't know what the fuss is about. The man had already got another job in Glasgow.'

'What do you say, Will?'

Her husband looked at her.

'Lizzie, you have to do these things in business. You can't help it. We . . . there were changes. There had to be.'

'Jock's changes,' Eliza said.

She had provoked her son's anger now, wanting to do that. He stood to his full height, his arms in to his sides, facing her in a way she felt he hadn't done for a long time, if he had ever done it, even as a small boy.

'All right! They are my changes. I came back to find this business running down. Father knows that's true, though he didn't want to admit it at first. I've worked like stink since I came back. The firm's on a new course.'

'With Jimmy Blane as one of the casualties?'

'Oh, for hell's sake! This is a welfare state. We're not wet nurses to everyone we employ. We pay huge taxes for someone else to do that.'

Eliza saw her husband's hands open and close then. He was looking down at them. She felt no pity for him though she saw him clearly as an old man with his hold on his life slipping. She felt suddenly that he had earned his position there in a wing chair, needing the comfort and support it gave him while his son stood on the hearth-rug. Jock didn't have to answer to his father any more, it had happened suddenly, but it was a fact. Will Innis had abdicated, and before tonight.

No one had told her because she was never told about Scotsroofs, but she should have sensed it, and not just carried on with her long immunity to that side of their living. And they had brought disaster to her house now, leaving it open to invasion.

Eliza reached for a box of cigarettes on the table and lit one. She looked again at her son.

'I told the Sergeant I didn't know the Blanes really. Just as names. Was that the right thing?'

'What the devil do you mean, Mother?'

'We have to have a family policy on this, don't we? No slip-ups anywhere.'

'Mother . . .' from Sheina.

'Be quiet!' She had no room for Sheina in this moment, as though anger had taken everything. 'Was that the right thing, Jock?'

'I suppose so. Yes.'

'Thanks. We have to look to you for our clear lead, don't we Jock? I'm sure you'll always be ready with it.'

Will Innis sat forward, holding on to the chair arms.

'Lizzie, what are you getting at?'

'You know perfectly well. I'm trying to adjust myself to the big change. We used to be a part of Kilrudderie. Now we just live here. It might be wiser not to, don't you think? What about a nice Adams flat in Edinburgh?'

'Were you part of this town?' Will shouted suddenly.

'Yes! In my silly way I was. I never denied it, until tonight. Until I said to the Sergeant that I didn't know the Blanes. I may have been a fool and a snob and a climber, but I belonged to this town. I probably even wanted them to see how well I was getting on, and enjoyed that. But I belonged here. So did you, Will. Every bit of you. Your damn' silly charities. And your damned good works. They belonged to something that's been wiped out.'

'Don't get hysterical, Mother,' Jock said.

Eliza walked around the table, over to him, standing in front of him on the hearth-rug.

'I never hit you when you were a little boy, Jock. I had all the right books, and I didn't let your nannies hit you either. But I'd like to now. Do you understand that? I'd like to now!'

His colour changed, quite suddenly, the tan on his dark face replaced by a kind of greyness. Eliza's voice was low, as though for him alone.

'I should have known long ago that you'd destroy what we have, because of your contempt for it. A little world, a few thousand people, presided over by the Innis family. Oh, I know you can say that's only a half-truth, maybe even less than that. But there is truth in it. It was real. Will did have a place here. He's been a clever business man, I know that, maybe cunning would be the word for it. But he was a kind man with that . . . the sort of kindness that isn't economic these days. That's what it boils down to, isn't it, Jock? Your father is completely out of date, old-fashioned enough to cling to values that can only clog efficiency.'

'Lizzie,' Will said from his chair, 'can't we stop shouting at each other?'

'I'm not shouting. It's not the sort of thing that would serve with Jock at all.'

Eliza threw her cigarette in the fire and then walking over to a side table, poured herself a whisky. She added an equal part of water, carefully. She carried her glass back and sat down on a settee, almost relaxed-looking, crossing her legs. She had a sense of playing the leading role in the Innis scene for the first time in her life, but there was no pleasure in it.

'There are two ways of living these days, Will,' she said. 'We had one, but Jock's in fashion with the other. Funnily enough I've never wanted to live in Edinburgh or London and make a splash with your money. You can't say I ever urged that on you. It never entered my head. We had a place here. Having a place doesn't seem to matter any more, but it always has to me. I knew how much a short time ago when the police car had driven off. Don't mistake me; I don't mean that I ever expected the Innis family to be popular in Kilmallock, just part of it, that's all. Part of something whole in terms of people. That would seem very silly to Jock, I know. You don't think of people that way at all in his world; they're either antagonists or unimportant. It's something I feel in London after the third day, and I've always been glad to get home, to be Lizzie Bain Innis again, with a real identity. Even if people laugh at Lizzie Bain Innis.'

She looked at her son.

'The best thing you can do now, Jock, is move Scotsroofs. It'll be a blow to the town, but in the long run it will be best.'

'Have you gone mad?' Will called out.

'Jock knows perfectly well what I mean. On one of the new industrial estates near Glasgow he would have the kind of labour problem easy to deal with. There would be no sentiment involved.'

'No one is moving Scotsroofs while I live, Lizzie!'

'Poor Jock, having his plans held up like that.'

'Mother, you can cut this out!'

Eliza smiled.

'I just wanted you to know, Jock, that you can't surprise me in any way. Were you thinking of going to America soon?'

'After the wedding, yes.'

Eliza stood.

'Don't wait for that. Get out! Do you hear me? Get out tonight! Clear off and let the rest of us patch things up if we can.'

She put the whisky glass untouched on a small table. She was trembling and couldn't control it, angry that Jock should see this. He was staring at her.

'You really mean that, Mother?'

'Yes, I mean it. I don't know what kind of a life we have left here, Sheina and Will and I. But the least you can do is to leave us to try and find it. To patch up what there is. Go to America and build up your new company. Perhaps you won't have very much need of the little one here before long. I suppose you've got all the money, or most of it? Will's backed you all the way?'

'Lizzie, you're not to talk to Jock like this!'

She turned on her husband, looking down at him.

'He's my son, too. Though you claimed him. You went his way. Look where it's landed you!'

'Mother, you're being quite absurd. All right there's a bit of a stink. Things have run against us, I admit that. But it's mostly bad luck, that's all.'

Sheina got out of the tub chair.

'Mother's right. It's not bad luck, it's you. I knew the Blanes. I was through their house, with Colin. I saw . . . what they'd worked for. And made. When it went they had nothing. You destroyed them. Lie to yourself if you like. You can't lie to us. And Father knows it, too. He's old, sitting there. Can't you see, he's old!'

Sheina began to cry. Eliza didn't. She felt a long way beyond tears, in a sick emptiness of shame. She remembered Hester saying that women of her generation could spend a whole life in folly, busy in it. That was what she had done; there was no turning from the cold fact of something that wasn't failure, because there had never been any real start, just Lizzie Bain turning herself into Eliza over the years. That was the sum total of her achievement, a son who was a cold stranger and a daughter who wouldn't find the little world her mother had built adequate because she had too much intelligence. And Will her husband was a done old man sitting in his chair.

There was something more in her emptiness, too, a sense of a real case to be made for the thing she was defending, and not succeeding in words. She knew with a kind of bitterness that the pattern she had half ignored was none the less the only one possible to her, and she

felt the only one possible for the man or woman with a heart—the community, the odd little whole formed by a town like this, with its curious balance, its pattern still retaining a kind of shape and meaning in a larger world that seemed to have lost this.

She had betrayed what she cared about, looking coldly at a police sergeant.

'I'll go,' Jock said. 'And I'll not come back.'

'Jock . . .' Will moved in the chair, pulling himself forward. 'Don't listen to them. This will blow over. It's a knock, I don't deny it. But it'll blow over. You'll have to come back. You've got to go on keeping your eye on our production here.'

'He can stay in the hotel,' Eliza said. 'Not my house.'

At the door she turned.

'I was told to tell you there's some inspector coming tonight. It might be a good idea, too, if you phoned the papers about the compensation you paid Jimmy Blane. To square yourselves. I hope it was a fat sum.'

Sheina called from the bottom of the stairs.

'Mummy wait!'

Eliza waited on the half-landing.

'Are we going through with the wedding?'

'Yes, dear.'

'It's going to be quite horrible, Mummy. That way. You think we ought to?'

'Yes, I think we ought to, Sheina.'

She took her daughter's hand, not knowing why they were going up the stairs or where they were going.

Eliza, lying on her bed in the dark, knew when her son left the house. A taxi came for him, there was his voice carrying briefly through the still summer night. Then a door slammed. There was a grinding of gears on the drive as he went away, and turning her head she saw a flicker of light on the heavy-leaved trees near the gate.

Then she cried, from a loss that had always been with her, but now made nakedly plain.

'Lizzie?' It was Will's voice from the door to his room that wasn't often opened.

'Yes?'

'He's gone.'

'I know.'

'You did it, Lizzie. You had no right.'

She didn't answer him, leaving him to stand there on the threshold of her room. She thought he had gone back to his own when she heard him crossing the floor to her bed.

'I don't want to be alone, Lizzie.'

'There's no need for you to be.'

He climbed into her bed, an old man puffing a little. When he fumbled for her hand she let him take it. Later she let him have much more, enduring in a kind of cold pity the half senile pantings and his groping fingers. She couldn't go with him on this desperate journey back to things lost, or forget the age of their bodies, hers and his. But she kept her pity.

23

MARY WOOD wished she had been in to Dundee to get a new hat for the wedding. She stared at herself in her three-summers-old model, fourteen-and-eleven from the bargain counter downstairs in the chain-store. It was small, and hats had gone big now with high crowns. The flowers on this one still had a mangled look from the time wee Joey had got hold of it and she had found him chewing.

She pulled it off and snipped at the worst flower with a pair of nail scissors. The bedroom door pushed open and Joey, no longer so wee, stood in the opening. The boy had hair the colour of gold silk, and Mary remembered his father, without rancour but with no sense of loss either.

'Ma. I'm wantin' an ice-cream.'

'You can't have it.' She put on the hat again.

'Granny said I could have it.'

'Well, your Granny can buy it for you. I'm not.'

'Are you oot? I'll come with you.'

'You'll not,' Mary said briefly.

She had towards her children a reserved affection that at no times became doting. They rarely irritated her in the way they irritated her mother; Kirsty Wood continually vibrated between clutching metaphorically the small, storm-blown waifs to her heavy bosom, or bellowing at them as misbegotten brats.

The four were growing up sturdily within the margins of the world Mary and her mother could provide, Aileen the eldest now seven and at school, where four of her classmates also did not know their fathers, so the child was not made to suffer from any great disability on this score. Harry, six, was at school, too, in the primary, smart enough to be already considerably in advance of his age group. Joey, at four, was still house-bound, and the baby, more placid than any of Mary's others at that period, spent a great deal of time contemplating his toes. With the children's allowance, and Mary's 'helping' and Kirsty's bit money put by, they managed very well indeed, with margarine for breakfast, but always butter at tea.

'What are you puttin' that on yer face for?' Joey asked.

'To freshen up,' Mary said, for she always tried to give sensible and honest answers.

'I'll take some, too.'

'You don't need it.'

'I don't like that hat,' Joey said.

'Did you not find it tasty then?'

It was an old family joke, well understood, and the boy giggled, holding on to the sidepost of the door, scraping at the bottom of it with one stout boot which was a size too big, for growth.

'Ma, I'm no wantin' to stay with Granny.'

'Well, you'll just have to.'

Life was simple enough, if you facced it. Mary was teaching them to do that. She looked at herself carefully in the mirror, stepping back to do it, deciding that she was all right for the gallery. It was unlikely that there would be anyone else up there, very unlikely.

Kirsty came out of the scullery at the moment Mary, pushing Joey in front of her, entered the kitchen. The big woman stared at her daughter.

'Where the hell are you goin', then?'

'To the wedding.'

Kirsty's face sagged. It was always a preface to anger.

'You stupid bitch. You'll do no such thing!'

'Ma, we'll not fight about this. I'm goin' to the wedding, and that's that.'

'Ma Gawd! I raise up a daughter who disnae give a damn what the toon thinks. An' never has. Do you not know what the folks are sayin' in this place?'

'Aye. It doesn't mean much to me.'

'Ye're a hard besom. Always been. The toon's scunned o' the Innises and a' their doin's. And you're for the weddin'.'

'Aye. I like weddings.'

'There's none of the folk in Kilrudderie goin'. Ye ken that? They'll be stayin' in their hooses this day. And right, too.'

Joey's mouth was a little open, to help him listen.

'Let them stay in their houses. What's it to me?'

'You've never gone wi' the way folk think aboot things have ye, Mary? Never a damn for the talk. Well, ah'm no like you. I mind what folks think. And I'm not having you in that church this day!'

'How'll you keep me out?'

'Ma Gawd! One day, Mary, I'll come to the end, that's what ah'll do. I'll pit ye oot.'

Mary laughed.

'You'd miss the bairns.'

'And wha' would take you in wi' that brood? You tell me that?'

'Och, plenty. It would leave you free to look after Tammy when he comes out the jail. And before he goes in again.'

Kirsty took a step towards her daughter, one hand up. Mary smiled. The hand dropped and the big woman began to snivel.

'You're no to talk aboot ma Tammy. It was no his doin'. This is no fit toon for a laddie. Folk like the Innises gettin' away wi' murder and ma Tammy locked up. Aye, that's justice.'

'It might be at that,' Mary said.

She felt a little ashamed of how easy it was to defeat her mother, to reduce her to this. But you had to do it or the talk got a bit much for in front of Joey. Mary liked to leave the real rows until the children were in bed; it was more seemly.

'Joey . . .' she said, a precautionary measure now. 'Out the back.'

The son respected his mother's hand, and he went, scraping the door shut, looking back.

'Now listen, Ma. I just want to go and sit in the gallery. That's all. There's no harm in it.'

'No harm, you say. Wi' the whole toon black angry wi' that family. And them secin' you goin' there. Can you get to the kirk wi'oot bein' seen?'

'No. I suppose not.'

'I suppose not! You're a fine pretty speaker. Never forgot what ye learned at the school did ye? A fat lot of good yer fine speakin's done you, wi' the hoose full of faitherless wains!'

'We've had this before,' Mary said.

'Aye. And we'll hae it again. Ma Gawd, what a've suffered in this life. What a've endured. A mither's hairt . . .'

'I've got one, too.'

'Maybe. But small right to it. You're not to go to the kirk, Mary. I've got my reasons. It's not just the toon. Ah'm not havin' you seen there, do you understand?'

'I'll hear the reasons.'

Kirsty sat down heavily, as though from some kind of emotional exhaustion. She looked up at her daughter as an antagonist, and

from the position of the defeated in most conflicts. Kirsty might have been rallying then for a decisive final conflict, almost taking her time to assess her strength for it. Her breathing was a continuous wheeze from what she called 'ma hairt' though no doctor had ever been able to find anything wrong with that organ.

'You'll be the death o' me yet,' Kirsty said, almost gently, a salvo to find her range.

'Too many potatoes is more likely,' Mary said.

'Damn you!'

'Oh, Ma, come off it. I want to be early. I'm away.'

'You're no to go. You're no to go to the kirk for that weddin' and blacken ma door after it. Do you think ah want the shame o' you sitting there and them seeing?'

'It's the bride they'll be looking at, Ma. No me. Joey's after an ice-cream, but he's not to get it. Don't you be giving him sixpence now. He gets too many.'

'Don't go on about the wain! You listen to me, Mary. As yer mither ah forbid ye to go.'

'And as Mary Wood I'm away.'

'Listen! You're not to be with them. And I'll tell you whly. I've held it too long. Aye, too damn' long, an' you wi' your wild ways that never came from ma side.'

'You mean they came from Pa? This is news to me. I never thought of him as a man with all that much spirit.'

'Your Pa! Ma man was no your faither, do ye hear me? You was gotten on ma body by Will Innis!'

Mary stood perfectly still for a moment.

'You're kidding,' she said softly.

'Am ah what? You don't believe me? I tell you this. Eddie Wood would never have married me the way I was but for the puckle o' money that went wi' it.'

'Well,' said Mary, letting out her breath.

'What are you standin' there gowking at? Do you not believe it? What do ye think I've lived on all these years? Did you think Eddie left me money in the bank? Not him. He was good at soppin' it up, that's all. But it kept comin', ye see, a wee trickle. Doon from the hill, you might say. From the almighty Will Innis himself!'

'Well, I'm blowed,' said Mary.

'You might well be. That's the shame I've hidden all these years. I was a poor weak lassie. . . .'

Kirsty stopped then. She stared at her daughter. Mary was laughing. It must be the hysterics.

'Oh, Ma! I was just thinking. They're his grandchildren. It's a fine selection of old Will's grandchildren we've got here!'

'Mary! How can you? How can you tear ma haint . . . ?'

Kirsty watched her daughter cross the kitchen to the dresser and there pick up her handbag. Mary opened it in her hands, inspecting the contents, deciding whether the hanky would do.

'What's in your mind?' Kirsty wailed.

'The wedding, of course. I'm going to join the family.'

Mary Wood walked down the street with the lime trees towards the church. She had to pass a house with the blinds half drawn at the windows, a house from which she knew that there would be no eyes noting her passage. It had the slightly shabby look of a place waiting for new owners and now, untenanted, seemed withdrawn from its neighbours, needing paint and attention, the door peeling.

The house jabbed at Mary for a moment, through her intent and absorbed interest in what lay just ahead, and she gave the place one look, her eyes running over it quickly.

Old Miss Beale was dead, and not long after she had come poking through the grass with her umbrella. There was a kind of responsibility on her, Mary knew, but she wouldn't take it. She couldn't reach out in her imagination at all to the old woman's living, if it had been that. She remembered that weird scream, and the words in it. It had been a shock, but the shock had passed and she had heard of the death without being hit by it directly. At Miss Beale's years you were just waiting to go anyway, and had been for a long time, sitting in a chair and watching your body, listening to its creaks, and sometimes going little walks as far as the churchyard. Miss Beale was now in the place she had liked best for long enough, and the mason had already chipped her name into the wall monument, under the rest of a dead family. Maybe someone young would come to her house and that would be a change for the better in this town which was too full of the old.

There were a few cars at the church gates, and a bus, but the street itself was empty for early afternoon, no one moving in it at all. There

would be plenty watching behind curtains though, Mary thought.

She was wearing her Sunday coat over a summer dress, partly to cover its faded colours, partly as protection against the wind which had come up, chill and cold from the east. Only her hat was festive.

There were a few people at the gates, strangers, some young men in striped trousers and black coats, one in a kilt, and a girl with a high thin voice. They looked at her as she passed through them but Mary kept her face tight, no sign of a smile which wouldn't be returned. The walk to the church doors was quite empty, a walk that seemed to sway about between the graves like a country road between the fields of rival farmers.

Under the lintel was another young man, a kiltie, this one splendid, with ginger hair and a luxurious moustache he brushed up. He seemed a little surprised by Mary for a moment, then flashed his smile. Her response was polite, though her eyes flicked over him. The young man's smile stayed. He even leaned a little towards her.

'Hello. Bride or Groom?'

For just a moment Mary was tempted. Then she couldn't keep back a laugh that was almost a giggle.

'I'm for the gallery.'

'Oh, jolly good. Friend of both lots, eh?'

'That's right.'

'Not many of the townspeople about. Don't they turn out for weddings these days?'

'Not always,' Mary said, circumspect, thinking that the young man had good knees. There wasn't any padding under his hose, either. He'd be a bonny dancer.

'You're in good time,' he said, moving with her to the door that opened out from the gallery stairs. He even held open the door.

'Thank you,' Mary said politely, her eyes on his, then dropping.

She went up the stairs, certain that he was looking at her legs and certain, too, that he wouldn't be disappointed in them.

There wasn't a soul in the gallery; Mary hadn't expected anyone. She had the choice of any seat she liked and she stood looking down on the pews that sloped steeply away from her towards the railing. The church beyond it looked different somehow, the organ screened by a wall of flowers, and there was the rich, festive scent of lilies and carnations.

Mary chose a seat half-way down from a kind of discretion,

settling in it, hearing a rustling of muted voices beneath and once a high, soprano peep from a surpliced, imported choir boy. But the seat was hard, one of the uncushioned ones, and she decided against it, meaning to move down only one and then, in the aisle changing her mind. She went to the very front and put her bag on the broad balustrade.

People began to trickle in, some of them talking more loudly than they would have done in an Episcopalian church. There wasn't one from the town, not an invited guest even from the bungalows up on the hill, all these, the County, come in from their big houses, raked in by Eliza Innis as part of her new living.

Sometimes Mary leaned over to peer. There was even a title or two, faces she recognized, men and women not quite at home, looking about them as though mildly curious. The women fluttered their hands at friends.

The organ began, the air suddenly full of sound with tricks in it of a kind not often heard in that building. She watched the choir boys arrive, bored on a fine day, scuffling into seats usually held by Mrs. Godwin and her choir. The ushers were busy now, moving up and down, the ones in the kilt fine-looking, the others like something out of a big shop. Once, coming back from his duty, Ginger Moustaches looked up and spotting her, grinned. It gave Mary the feeling of being included, though no other heads turned to look up at all.

It was Ginger Moustaches who showed Eliza Innis to her seat up at the front. She came down the aisle alone, during a kind of lull, in a tight pink dress and tall hat to match. From behind she looked a girl. Then it was the Fairway-Campbells, the Colonel kilted, too, the Campbell tartan, his wife in a funny sort of speckled dress that seemed mostly purple, with a great floppy hat on her head, and her arms bare. Oddly like a man's arms they seemed to Mary.

The appearance of the bridegroom and his man was a signal to get out her hanky, to have it ready. When the processional started she began to cry, long before she saw the bride.

Sheina seemed tall beside her father, a thin girl in white with a short veil, leaning on the arm of a broad old man who moved heavily, as though he could never quite get his steps in time with the blaring beat from the organ. The Minister was waiting for them, in the simple robes of his office looking almost a stranger against that screen

of flowers. Mary had the feeling that he was nervous, not quite sure of the pattern in the things happening around him. He was a nice little man but he could never look like one of their bishops. Colin turned his head, as though impatient of the time things were taking, but then he looked at Sheina, watching her come.

Mary made a choking sound into the hanky.

It was a long service, there seemed no end at all to the choir and the echoing of boys' voices up to the roof that had woodworm in it and would have to come down some day. Mary felt almost weary by the time the end came, having spent more feeling than she had intended, the handkerchief crumpled into a damp ball in one hand. There was an ache behind her eyes before Sheina turned, on her husband's arm. The bride was trembling, her bouquet shaking. Colin kept looking at her, but the girl's eyes only went to him once and her smile was almost frightened.

Mary knew she had better let the church empty before making a move down the stone stairs. There was a recessional below, the Fairway-Campbells arm in arm, turning their heads and smiling, then Eliza Innis with her husband. Eliza was composed, but she moved stiffly in the tight, smart dress, the curve of her lips fixed and held.

Will was an old man all right, with a lot to shake him recently and showing it. Mary's stare became concentrated, the girl taken then by a deep curiosity about the past which was new to her. This old man and her mother. You couldn't see it happening, couldn't imagine Kirsty as that poor lassie at all, if she had ever been a poor lassie. There were no pictures of her as a girl in the house, not even of her marriage to Eddie, nothing on which it was possible to build a picture of dimmed years.

Suddenly Will Innis lifted his eyes up to the back of the church. Mary was conscious of how she must look, one face at the gallery rail. She saw a slackening about his mouth, and he blundered against his wife, bumping her. Eliza turned to him in a kind of irritation. He went on looking up at the gallery.

Mary Wood smiled at her father.

In the stone house with its immaculate gardens all about they would be opening the champagne. Mary walked into the High Street, wearing the hat which announced where she had been, an emotional

experience softening up an earlier firmness towards Joey. She went into Tomelli's and bought her son an ice cream, not just a slider, but a shilling special of chocolate whip in a cardboard cup with its own spoon. Tomelli in his shop seemed to notice nothing but the noise of the cash register and he never even looked at the hat. Outside other people did, but no one stopped her to make any comment.

It had been a lovely wedding. They always were, giving Mary briefly a feeling of having been denied something, almost a sense of loss that was layered under her routines and her equable temperament. It was a little like the feeling which had caught her after the first time with Geordie, when he went away to his bus leaving her under a hedge. She hadn't really known it with other men at all, and she didn't probe or try to dig it out, rather as one did nothing about a tooth that hurt suddenly, with sharp alarm signals of pain. You hoped they would go and not come back.

Mary closed the front door which left the passage almost dark.

'Joey? I've got something for you.'

Mary took off her coat, and the hat with it. She gave her head a shake, loosening her hair with her fingers.

'Did you not hear me, Joey?'

'I'm here, Ma. With the man.'

The man was Geordie. He was sitting in the best chair by the range, with his knees slightly apart, his kilt draped carefully down between them in the regulation Army manner. Clutching at him, using Geordie as a fixed object, was Joey.

'Hiya, Mary?'

'Geordie! What in . . . ? How did you get in here?'

He grinned.

'Ah came callin'.'

'But . . . ?'

'I was left wi' the wain. Your Ma is oot for something to our tea. There was nothin' in the hoose, seemingly.'

'I don't get this, Geordie?'

He seemed pleased with himself, even in the chair a big man in a room that wasn't quite large enough to take him.

'It's awfy simple, Mary. Are you no giving Joey his ice-cream?'

She held out the carton, still in the doorway. Joey took it, polite in his surprise.

'Thanks.'

'Geordie, have you been talking to my Ma?'

'Aye, we've been at it. Better part of an hour. Your life history.'

'Ma wouldn't . . . ?'

The grin was still on his face.

'Oh, aye, she fairly let her hair doon aboot you. There's nae doot you've been a problem.'

'I can't understand her asking you to tea.'

'She's afraid I might change ma mind and nip oot.'

'What from?'

'Gettin' married on you.'

The hurt was there again, sharp, sudden, catching her. She didn't say anything. Joey had settled on a chair, eating ice-cream, shovelling it in, forgetting them.

'What do you say, Mary?'

'You're . . . daft. You can't mean it!'

'Oh, but I do. I've been thinkin'. I'm leavin' the Army. It's time I was oot. I'm no a career man at all. Mind you, I like it fine. But I want to settle, too.'

'With me?'

'Aye. Why not? I havenae been what you might call a moral man mysel'. But I'll make a damn' good husband. Ah've a way wi' the wains. And a mighty skelp when they need it.'

'Geordie . . . I've got four. . . .'

'Ah ken. And anither on the way, maybe?'

'How did you . . . ?'

'Och, ah've great confidence in ma powers. Don't you see it? We'll be seven. Why, there's no a toon in the country where we wouldn't get priority for a Cooncil hoose wi' a brood like that. Then there's the allowances. We'd dae all right.'

Geordie who didn't smile much was still grinning.

'I'm no a drinking man for all I was in the Army, if that's what you're thinkin'. But there's one thing, though.'

'What are you getting at?'

'Just this. Nae funny business when we're hitched. If there's ony o' that I'll knock ye to hell.'

Mary put out her hand to the door-post. She had never known just this feeling of weakness and of joy.

'Okay, Geordie,' she said.

Elsie Garr couldn't settle to a meal. There were opened tins of food sitting about in the scullery, but she wasn't able to organize herself to put the contents in pans for warming, and to set a table. She scarcely ate at all, bread, tea, sometimes milk. That was still being left, about the only thing, for the vans had stopped honking for her outside the prison to which she had the key, but which was a prison none the less. Jock had the other key, he must have taken it to America with him. Or thrown it away.

If there was safety staying in a house with the curtains drawn, then she had safety. She had nothing else, a little shocked at herself, at her inability to establish any control of feeling and hold it. This was something new for her, weakening to the body as well as the spirit. She could feel the flesh leaving her bones and sometimes washed her face to look in the mirror at sunken eyes. Once she put on make-up, heavily, and then she was sick.

It was as though the house was her father's again, not really offering shelter at all, wanting to push her out. She couldn't accept the changes she had made as real; the house was haunted by an old man. She put on the telly and sat to watch and then was suddenly conscious that he must have done just that, old Archie Garr alone at night, looking at the box after Morag went.

Morag didn't come in any more. Things had moved past that point where she could make excuses to herself to do it, clutching now the respectability she believed her proud possession all her days. The respectable didn't come through doors like this, for all old habit.

At night it was worse. The day had never meant Jock but the night did, and it seemed to come slowly, the light failing with painful deliberation, but once it had gone the dark moved in with the feel of something settled and endless, a dark with a life of its own, a breathing that wasn't her breathing.

She went to her bed and lay on it, and sometimes the pain would go, but when it did it was like being dead, except for the clock ticking. You lay still as a corpse and heard the clock ticking.

Mostly she sat below in the kitchen with the fire out. Jock had sent no message; she had heard from the fishmonger the last time he came with his van, the man selling her half a pound of best sole and then letting his news out with the change, his eyes gone sly watching her. She had paid him and gone in with her fish, which sat in the scullery until it stank and she threw it out.

No message at all, not a word, and for the second time. Maybe you didn't recover from being a fool too often. Elsie had the feeling that she mightn't recover, that there would be a point soon, if it hadn't already come, when she would have to fight to hold her life. Sometimes aware of this, she built up little stores of a sort of courage, with a sense of achievement, and then under recurring pain they crumbled.

There was nothing to do, of course; that might be it, no demands on her. It was almost funny to think that if the old man had lived and she been forced to go on looking after him that might have been enough. It would have at least been a routine to hold to.

It was night after the seventh day. She sat in her father's chair, not smoking because there were no more cigarettes and she couldn't go out to get them. There were a lot of things you couldn't get in a prison; you did without.

The clock said ten-fifteen, hours yet before she went up the stairs and tried the change of lying on her bed. Better not to try it too soon. Sometimes, when lucky, she still caught at sleep, held in its mercy, but not often.

She couldn't believe the knocking on the door when she heard it. There was no sense in that sound echoing through the little house; it produced no jerk on her nerves at all. She waited for it to stop.

It did, and then started again, a frenzied clattering. The light was on, of course, and whoever was out there could see that. A lot of people must have seen her lights burning from the windows where they watched. She had the sense sometimes of them watching her, knowing that it must be going on, but the feeling of it never really came close to her at all.

The knocker was being used like a ram. The sound of it got inside her head, hurting. That made her get up, with a kind of anger, going out into the hall, turning the key, pulling the door wide back.

A man she had never seen in her life stood there. He was in his thirties somewhere, with a little moustache, wearing a neat blue suit, but his tie sagged from his collar and he swayed. He was drunk.

'Miss . . . Garr. You won't know me. Johnson. That's my nam'. Johnson. Pat Johnson. If you'd ever been . . . roun' to the Farmer's Rest . . . you'd have seen me. Barman. That's what I am. Barman, see?'

It was hard to find words, like looking for a lost habit.

'What do you want?'

'I . . . Excuse me calling. But I had to wait, you see. Until after closing. Busy night, of course. Isn't it? You understand?'

'No! What do you want?'

He smiled. It began at one side of his mouth but was not quite completed.

'Well? What do I want? What do we all want, eh? Bit of fun.'

It took her no time to get that. There had been many like him once.

'Go away,' she said. 'Go away from my house.'

'Now look here, there's no need to be like that. We all know what's happened, don't we? Maybe you lost your boy friend. There's plenty more. . . . Plenty.'

The words came easily enough to Elsie now.

'Get out of here. If you don't go I'll open an upstairs window and shout for the police. You won't have your job at the hotel for long.'

'Listen. . . .'

She slammed the door. She stood behind it, waiting in a silence for a minute or two. Then she heard his shuffling feet.

She knew the time had come to get out, to start the fight. The town whore. He was the first, there would be others. She had to get out . . . out of the prison.

IT was raining on the Riviera, coming down with an audible pattering on the palm leaves of the hotel garden. Every now and then a mild little gust of wind stirred the curtains at the open french windows on to the balcony Sheina had been expecting and found. Their room wasn't exactly the bridal suite, but it was expensive and it had a lush, just faintly faded air of period luxury which was reminiscent of the films. In the first thin morning light it had a certain shabbiness, too, for all the gilt and the draperies.

Sheina turned and looked at Colin. His mouth was a little open, his fair head turned into a silk pillow. He didn't snore, but he made odd bubbling noises in his sleep.

The first days of the honeymoon, following the first night, had not been a total success. There was nothing to do. At times, sitting in a café with a husband as new as any in the south of France, Sheina had found herself regretting Inverness. It was perfect weather for fishing and certainly Colin would have been happier with a rod in his hand than trying to make conversation before lunch with the empty saucers of that unpleasant aperitif piling up on the table in front of them. Sheina had caught herself more than once with the thought that if this was complete love, someone had been cheating somewhere.

So far the raptures of the bed had escaped her. Colin had been very nice about this, saying that with British girls it usually took time, and he persevered, revealing himself as a man not easily discouraged.

Sheina had tried, very hard. She wanted desperately total surrender, to escape completely that sense of a portion of herself as an observer fixed somewhere on a moulded ceiling. The fact that the observer remained as a third party in a setting so carefully designed for two produced in her a continuing feeling of guilt that was somehow a bar to gaiety, even to her normal good spirits. She wasn't even dancing as well as she did at home.

They had meant to loll on a golden beach, running down at intervals to splash into a blue sea. Instead the Mediterranean was lead-coloured, and sluggish in movement, exactly as it was in the west of Scotland during the Glasgow Fair holidays. The rain came down with

the same suggestion of immense available reserves, brightening for brief, mocking intervals which were never really confirmed by sun. There were no bikinis, only raincoats, and the gigolos were beginning to get a pinched, grey look as they stood about in the crowded bars where there were too many clashing perfumes and folded umbrellas.

Sheina looked at Colin's nose. It would never irritate her, she decided. There were so many noses it would be hard to live with. He was sweet, really, and if she hadn't yet achieved ecstasy with him they had got to something else, a kind of comfort, a certainty that very soon they would make between them a little world to carry about. This had warmed her when she had still been cold from what had happened before the wedding. Somehow with Colin there was a kind of perspective, the feeling that things sorted themselves out and became bearable, and this was a lot to get from a husband after a few days.

She liked more than his nose, and suddenly touched his cheek with her fingers.

He woke at once, almost in the military tradition, and apparently alert. She was certain that before he gave her his attention he flicked back in his mind to the night before to check on the adequacy of his performance. It was clearly part of male pride, something to assess before you faced the new day. When he relaxed again, satisfied, she could have kissed him.

'Hello, sweetie,' Colin said. 'Still raining?'

'Yes. Don't stare at me. I'm going to have to start using curlers tonight.'

'Lord. Old married couple. Will you leave them off on Tuesdays and Thursdays?'

He swung out of bed and went into the bathroom. The lavatory flushed and then there was the sound of a brisk teeth-brushing. When he came in again his hair was combed.

'Horrible not having morning tea, isn't it?' he said

Then he came over and kissed her with the faintly absent air of a man coming back from the office.

'What the hell will we do?' he said, looking out.

The bed sagged under his weight.

'Colin, could we get our money back? I mean if we went home early? I wanted to get out of Scotland when we left, but I'd like back now.'

'Good Lord!' He looked at her startled. 'This is the time you'll remember all your life.'

'I'd like to remember it somewhere else. At home. I should never have given in to Mother on this. I had a kind of instinctive feeling about it, but I was weak and gave way. I'm going to stop giving way, Colin. I'm going to start right now doing what we want. People aren't going to steam-roller over us.'

He got back into bed and put a hand on her breast, looking at her.

'Don't you like France?' he asked.

'I don't think so. Not much.'

'Neither do I, actually. Never could stand the place. Paris gives me the willies. Had a gay week-end there once and was bored unconscious. Domestic type, that's me, wanting my own little woman with her label round her neck.'

'Even if I'm not very good?'

'You will be. It's all a matter of training, lassie. I'd be pretty fed up if you'd showed signs of having had it.'

'Oh, Colin. . . .'

He pulled her over against him. In a little while he said into her ear:

'If we go back to Scotland where would you like to go?'

'Fortingal, I think. The food's better anyway.'

'All right, I'll send them a wire this morning. We won't tell a soul. Sneak back quietly over the border and belt up into the Highlands. Keep it absolutely dark.'

'Absolutely. Oh, Colin, I'm sure I'll be much better there. . . .'

'Pet! Stop fretting. Now I'm going to ring down for one of their unspeakable breakfasts.'

He turned on his stomach, reaching out for the phone, but paused.

'Pity I won't have a rod,' he said.

'Darling, you'll be able to rent one in the hotel. I'm certain.'

'Of course. You know, this is really going to be fun.'

Sheina lay still while he used the phone, ordering coffee and croissants in regimental French, even though everyone in the hotel spoke English. She had the feeling suddenly that happiness was near, even beginning to reach her.

On Sundays the bus service from Kilmallock to Limerick was thin, only once every three-quarters of an hour from the stance in the

High Street. There was a bus just at church time, when the bell was tolling distantly with a tone of remote entreaty, as though it had lost the power long ago to be demanding. Three people were waiting; an old couple slumped on a bench, with their bundles about them, looking utterly exhausted from their holidays, occasionally muttering to each other, but their eyes dull to the world. There was a young man, too, standing at the edge of the pavement, with a small overnight case at his feet and a golf bag which he held upright beside him.

There weren't many in the streets as yet, a few casuals out for the Sunday papers from Tomelli's and two or three clumps of church-goers, self-conscious and removed in dark clothes that made no concession to summer. These hurried against a kind of general relaxed indolence in a sun-bathed town that had long ago abandoned any pretence of adherence to the old Sabbath traditions.

The young man lit a cigarette. On the whole his week-end had bored him. He had heard a good deal about the hill course, and had played over it twice, but didn't like the greens, and had found the rough obtrusive, as though the man who had originally laid out the whole scheme had indulged in little tricks that really weren't very clever. Certainly he had been off his putting which was enough to put anyone out of temper, but he had been partnered both times by a casual from the hotel whose golf manners were of the worst, a continual gabble about earlier play over this course which his present performance made seem highly improbable. Then there had been the inevitable night in the bar, without a good-looking woman in sight, just golfers with the kind of post mortems which were unendurable when they all had louder voices than you. The young man had over-spent his week-end budget by two pounds for drinks which had brought him no pleasure.

A Jaguar went by, with four people in it, all of them in sun-glasses, looking at Kildrudderie for the first and last time with expressions of fixed boredom. One of the four was quite a pretty girl and the young man's eyes followed the car out of sight.

The church bell penetrated his discontent then, and he wondered why so few people seemed to be responding to it. There couldn't be much else to do but go to church in a dump like this on a Sunday. It certainly wasn't his idea of a holiday resort, and catch him bringing his wife and kiddies here for the two weeks when he got married, a

thing he wasn't in any hurry to do. He saw a lot of marriage amongst his friends and at thirty-two was still resisting it, though he liked women.

He became aware then of a fourth passenger for the bus, a girl emerging from a lane, with two bags, one in each hand. They looked heavy bags. Then he looked at the girl.

He almost drew in his breath. She wasn't part of the small-town Sunday-morning setting at all, a very long way from it. The summer two-piece shouted London. He stared.

She didn't see him, probably deliberately. She had a kind of class, or a good line in it. She put down her bags as though still surprised to find herself having to be her own porter.

Somehow he knew her face; he was quite certain of that. It was as though he had looked at her face and close up, often, though not recently. He liked to be able to place people, usually could, and this was tantalizing.

So was the way she stood, not seeing anything. She might have been waiting for a bus, angrily, because the Rolls had broken down. No, that wasn't quite right, either. The anger was real, though, a kind of unspoken protest at finding herself where she was. But she didn't look a gal who had got her plush living by being born into it, just a little too smart, and too much make-up.

She was certainly using a lot of that, all the old war paint. For a bus ride to Perth?

A door across the street opened, and a woman came hurtling out of it, flushed, clutching a hymn book, in a dark hat and coat for church. The woman started along the pavement, almost running, then she glanced across the street. She stopped absolutely dead. Her pale face, untouched by summer, became frozen in astonishment, staring at the girl.

The church bells, in a final flurry, tugged at the woman, but she seemed almost about to resist them, to turn back into her house above one of the shops. Then she yanked at white cotton gloves, tucked the hymn book against her body, and went on, but not without looking back twice.

The girl on the pavement never moved, as though she had noticed nothing, apparently staring straight across the road at a display in the chemist's window.

The young man calculated the distance and then let his golf bag

go, with a little guidance. It struck one of the girl's bags, knocking it against her legs. There was a clattering of irons on concrete.

'Oh, I say, I'm so sorry. What a stupid oaf. It hasn't . . . ah . . . laddered your stockings?'

She straightened the bag, not looking at him, not looking at her leg either.

'It doesn't matter.'

He was being pushed off. He didn't mind that. The women worth bothering about put up a lot of resistance just at this stage. He smiled.

'Ever seen anything deader than this town on a Sunday?'

She looked at him then, and her eyes made him suddenly uneasy. But he knew her, he was sure of it. He said:

'Not much of a place for a holiday, at least I haven't found it so. Have you enjoyed yourself?'

'No.'

Well, they had that in common, something to talk about if she let him sit next to her in the bus. It didn't look at the moment as though she would, but you could never tell.

'Going a long way?' he asked.

'Yes.'

This was the beginning of the big break-down; he could sense it. He didn't rush things, keeping a deliberate silence for a moment or two, and in it the bus came towards them, looming suddenly from around the Town Hall.

The old couple heaved themselves up, collecting oddments, and the conductress came down the steps to give a hand with parcels. The young man made a gesture towards one of the bags but the girl shook her head, and he didn't press that.

'Well, so long Kilmallock,' he said. 'Tell me, do you think anything ever happens in this town?'

'Nothing much,' Elsie Garr said, and got on the bus.

John McCall sat in the vestry, robed and ready for the pulpit. The Beadle was moving around as he always did at the end of the organ voluntary, as though to exercise his rheumaticky legs for the steep climb up into the pulpit. The huge Bible waited for him on a table.

'There's no many oot there the morn,' the Beadle said.

'No,' John agreed.

He knew perfectly well why there was only a sprinkling in the

pews, the old faithfuls and a few visitors. The rest of the town had sent him to Coventry. He was at a point of low ebb in his ministry here, not a point of no return, but a kind of landmark for all that, a time he knew he would always remember.

The beginning was a long way back, if not in weeks and days, at any rate in the kind of experience which ought to bring wisdom but usually didn't. It might well have started on that morning when he went to Archie Garr's house ostensibly to visit the old man, but really to see Elsie. He had blundered there, defying the label the town had put on the girl, but never really getting near her at all. And later on she had seemed to wear the label, flaunting it. A lot of people believed she had come back just to be with Jock Innis and this could be the truth, but whether it was or not, the girl had gone on to something that had left him powerless. He hadn't been to see her after the talk began, either, and now he knew she would never open the door to him again.

It was odd how you could go on down a road, stubbornly, that seemed to take you straight away from the one you were supposed to be on. He had served no one by getting involved with Tammy Wood and having to appear at the trial which got the youth sent up. A minister of the church didn't help himself by being a witness for the prosecution. Vivian had never said this, but she could have done in those days when she moved around the manse with a sort of minimum of communication between them. They were over that now, in the way that women come to accept what has happened, back with routine. But the small misery of Tammy Wood lay behind them, with its little lump of static bitterness.

Vivian's dahlias were doing magnificently this year, that was something. And it was a real joy to her that someone else was now President of the Women's Guild at last.

John had felt the shock of what had happened to the Blane family as a direct blow to the place of the church in the community. He had no real illusions about this, but he liked to think of retaining a kind of hold on the fringe, at least, of the living that went on about him, able at times to have a leaven of Grace work through him. There had been no chance with the Blanes up on their hill in a world they were making for themselves. They weren't on his roll and though he had visited them in the new house, it had been to receive the politeness reserved for a convenience that came in handy on rare occasions.

Jimmy Blane he had never even talked to. There had been need for him, desperate need, and he hadn't even known about it. A better man might have sensed it, and gone back to that house, and back.

The Beadle picked up the Bible.

'I'm in then,' he said, opening the vestry door.

John rose and stood waiting, looking into a church which he hadn't entered since its strangely alien use for the Innis wedding, when the town had stayed away. They were still staying away, punishing the Minister for the things on the slate against him and for an imported choir and pomp laid on for a family they had come to hate. In a way they were right about the pomp; it had given him no pleasure at all, just something to which he was committed, part of the curious road from which he couldn't seem to turn back.

John gathered his robes about him and stepped over the threshold. The Beadle was waiting, with the heavy wooden gate to the pulpit held open. He climbed the steps and without looking at his congregation, sat down, hidden by the lectern, for the moment that should be consecration but today was empty. Then he stood and looked down.

About sixty people and the choir.

'Let us worship God with hymn number one hundred and forty-nine in the Revised Church Hymnary. Number one hundred and forty-nine. "O come, O come, Immanuel. . . ."

It was one of the rather popish-sounding hymns that John liked because they seemed to suit the old building with its history of seven hundred years. But it didn't suit the choir. Mrs. Godwin, valiant as usual, had none the less clearly dealt with something like a strike at the practice. She gave one quick look about her as though not yet quite certain of complete victory, then plunged in. The choir, with no hint of the bounce with which they would have tackled revivalist syncopation, followed. The congregation, noisily on its feet, resented the alien chanting. There was a good deal of coughing not covered by the organ which for some reason was giving forth reedy tremolos.

Then a clear voice sounded from the back of the church, untrained but firm, loud as though nothing could daunt it this morning. John looked for and saw Mary Wood in the hat she had worn when alone in the gallery at the wedding. It was Mary, more than the choir, who was engaged on rescuing his old tune.

He heard her voice again when he had sat down during the last

stanza of the hymn before the sermon. On the lectern above him were the typewritten words over which he had gone through the usual struggle in his study, but now he couldn't remember anything in them. He saw suddenly his humility over that earlier dossier of failures as false, almost an indulgence, and he was conscious of strength coming, without pride, this time even without prayer.

John rose and picked up the sheets which had been waiting, sliding them out of sight on to a shelf, for the first time in his church ready to speak from his heart of a love that was always available when reached for from despair.

Beneath him the congregation settled. Mrs. Godwin, the little bird, looked up bright-eyed. A row of children were handed sweeties. In the manse pew Vivian McCall pulled out a hymn book and opened it to page one. She often did this during her husband's sermons, reading hymn after hymn to escape from the sound of John's voice. The new Elder, Walter Lowry, a rich farmer replacing Archie Garr, scratched the back of his head and thought about the field he had just bought, at a terrible price, but it rounded out his farm, making it four hundred acres. In this County that was something. He hoped the Minister wouldn't be long-winded.

